Creative Nonfiction: Chasing Its Own Tale

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation explores the theory, history, and criticism of creative nonfiction to foreground the issues of truth in personal writing. My thesis focuses on memoir and personal essay and asks whether creative nonfiction can deliver on its promise, whether it can lay bare the bones of nonfiction using creative tools. I explore how authors problematize truth in their works and what challenges creative nonfiction writers and readers to trust the truth of self in texts. I examine the pitfalls of creative nonfiction – what gives it an unreliable reputation in some circles and why its ethics are questioned.

Creative nonfiction pilfers from genres that also pilfer from one another so that it lives in a borderland of shifting boundaries that defy neat categorization. At the heart of my project, I offer evidence that creative nonfiction can be as authentic as the "self-evacuated prose of western epistemology" (Bishop 34), for self, truth and the world mirror one another, tell the truth on one another as they shape and reshape one another with time. This messy movement and plasticity can be more honest than some di*still*ed truth that unrealistically offers an ironclad meaning behind the curtain of objectivity or omniscience. With self's face in front of each word in creative nonfiction, the "I" stands honest, putting truth where its mouth is, holding the self accountable, reminding us, lest we forget, a being with all its desires, hatreds, memories, narratives, biases is, after all, honestly in everything we write and read. Truth then becomes human. This dissertation

argues *with* the first person singular and creative nonfiction *for* the first person singular and creative nonfiction as a valid means of truth/knowledge-making in our personal essays, and finally in our students' writing. In short, this project chases the tale of creative nonfiction through the centuries.

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(This dissertation is dedicated to those who taught me truth)

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To Will, my very real Will. My will power, my love…all words lead to you.

To the Reader,

This dissertation is "written in good faith, reader. It warns you from the outset" (Montaigne 3) that you are entering into the ninth letter of the alphabet, into the first person. You are bo arding my search; with my "I" at the humble helm, I attempt to understand how the "I," truth, and the "creative" work together in nonfiction.

Entering the "I" is intimate. Entering the "I" is complicated. A marriage between the truth and the "I" (even though both may swear on a stack of bibles to be faithful through sickness and health) breeds doubt, for truth is a loaded word and can be too many things all at once to any given "I" that it could cancel itself out; by signifying too much of everything and anything, truth spreads its meaning thin. When truth is conjugated with me, you, him, her, us, them, when truth penetrates the personal, there are as many truths as there are selves.

Some of truth's synonyms are: accuracy, actuality, authenticity, certainty, correctness, exactitude, fact, genuineness, infallibility, the nitty-gritty, perfection, plain talk, precision, principle, rectitude, rightness, veracity, verisimilitude, verity, honesty, loyalty, candor, constancy, dedication, devotion, dutifulness, faith, faithfulness, fidelity, frankness, integrity, openness, realism, revelation, sincerity, uprightness, veridicality, *the whole story*. Nonfiction.

Which definition, on which day, and at what time will the "I" choose in order to capture the whole story? Is there such a thing as the whole story? In my long essai (attempt), we will move one page at a time, one "I" at a time and search each individual way of representing his/her/my truth in text. We will define and deconstruct truth along

the way through each “I” we encounter. We will doubt, lose faith, run into dead-ends but, perhaps, find trust in personal truth as we chase its tale.

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Chapter One: Creative Nonfiction: A Nontology?

We have not been as bold as we might have been in establishing modes of nonscientific inquiry because what is not scientific is often dismissed as not rigorous.

—John C. Raymond,
"Enthymemes, Examples, and Rhetorical Method"

The boundaries of creative nonfiction will always be fluid as water.

—Mary Clearman Blew

...the terminology itself is still under construction. Once the generic distinctions start to leak, people bring in anything that might conceivably hold water. "Literary nonfiction," "creative nonfiction," and "lyric essay" are some of the makeshift semantic hybrids in current use…

—Arthur Saltzman, "Preface"

Sum Es Est Sumus Estis Sunt.

Thoreau writes, "We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person speaking" (1581). Even though in current times the first person singular has been encouraged, many of us have been taught from grammar to graduate school *not* to remember the first person singular in our critical pursuits. However, the red-penned paradox blazing at the bottom of too many student papers is confusing: If an argument is to come into *being* then no "I" (no human being*)* is allowed. Western epistemology has been guilty through the centuries of dictating that truth belongs in a Petri dish and our writing-self in search of this objective truth belongs in a lab coat, for the first person singular sacrifices philosophical rigor as our emotions and biases enter into the making of meaning. Nancy K. Miller in *But Enough About Me,* quotes Pascal to emphasize this

distrust of "autobiographical acts." "The self is hateful… ('Le moi est haïssable.') It is unjust in itself, to the extent that it makes itself the center of all'" (13). This dissertation argues *with* the first person singular and creative nonfiction *for* the first person singular and creative nonfiction as a valid means of truth/knowledge-making in our scholarly writing, in our memoirs, personal essays, and finally in our students' writing. Truth need not be threatened because creativity and personal, idiosyncratic vision enter into it. Truth need not be compromised because reality is *egotized* or "narrativized" (Hesse 32). This dissertation explores the theory, history and criticism of creative nonfiction to foreground the issues of truth in personal writing. My thesis focuses on memoir and personal essay and asks whether creative nonfiction can deliver on its promise, whether it can lay bare the bones of nonfiction using creative tools. I explore how authors problematize truth in their works and what challenges creative nonfiction writers and readers to trust the truth of self in texts. I examine the pitfalls of creative nonfiction, what gives it an unreliable reputation in some circles and why its ethics are questioned. I also explore why in recent times the first person singular is rearing its head everywhere. Nancy K. Miller discusses why the self now needs to make itself known in memoir. I believe her logic applies, not just to memoir, but also to creative nonfiction:

> We may also be witnessing a kind of unconscious apocalyptic fear of erasure that comes with millennial, not to say Internet fever. Put another way, memoir is the record of an experience in search of a community, of a collective framework in which to protect the fragility of singularity in a postmodern world. Maybe it's not so surprising that we seem to need memoirs now…Memoir paradoxically is the most generous of modern

> genres. Indeed, the point of memoir – when it succeeds – is to keep alive the notion that experience can take the form of art and that remembering is a guide to living. (3)

Creative nonfiction is a giant umbrella term stretching at the seams to cover a large body of parts: memoir, personal essay, the lyric essay, travel writing, nature writing, literary journalism (Perl 9), creative scholarship, cultural criticism, autobiography, "autocritography" (Miller, *But Enough About Me* 15). Creative nonfiction does not keep its hands to itself; it grabs from fiction scene, dialogue, vivid description, novelistic structure; it pockets from poetry form, meter, poetic devices; and from nonfiction and journalism, the unmediated facts; and finally it borrows from literature an imaginative approach to language. Creative nonfiction pilfers from genres that also pilfer from one another so that it lives in a borderland of shifting boundaries that defy neat categorization. Creative nonfiction has so much freedom in form that Patricia Hampl calls it a homeless genre. The genre indeed is ontologically challenged; it is also existentially challenged since the writer's self searches for meaning and discovery in the text. But just because creative nonfiction morphs, shifts and searches does not necessarily mean its truths are unreliable. At the heart of my project, I offer evidence that creative nonfiction can be as authentic as the "self-evacuated prose of western epistemology" (Bishop 34), for self, truth and the world mirror one another, in other words, they tell the truth on one another as they simultaneously shape and reshape. This messy movement and plasticity can be more honest than some di*still*ed truth that unrealistically offers an ironclad meaning behind the curtain of objectivity or omniscience. With self's face in front of each word in creative nonfiction, the "I" stands honest, putting truth where its

mouth is, holding the self accountable, reminding us, lest we forget, a being with all its desires, hatreds, memories, narratives, biases is, after all, honestly in everything we write and read. Truth then becomes human.

That stated, I confess my relationship to creative nonfiction has not always been a trusting one. In fact, I have not only been quite skeptical of the genre but even antagonistic towards it as it defies clean-cut definitions; thus, this chapter will focus on the reading and writing of creative nonfiction in our scholarly pursuits and in our pedagogies. I will reveal the conflicts I have had in accepting an expressive mode of making meaning in my writing for the academy and in my teaching in undergraduate institutions. In the following pages, I examine my frustrating process of coming to terms with creative nonfiction to argue finally that creative nonfiction inspires reflective, original, searching, communicative and engaged scholarship.

A Second Telling

It is all too appropriate that in this project I question if a subjective truth in creative nonfiction can be depended on. I am Southern, born from generations of bourbon-tongued storytellers who know how to liquor up anything dry to be told, the slurry self stretching the sober truth for the sake of a damn good story. Those drunk Southerners taught me an Alabama version of creative nonfiction: how to abuse the facts with one too many creative liberties so that through the years I have been asked (by more than a few) for a second telling, the way it really happened. I confess it has been a long-winded, bending pursuit to straighten and narrow my tongue. I have had to mix a little water with my purple prose so saturated with self, the literariness of language much of

the time stretching my imagination away from nonfiction and into artifice, artfully acculturated yes, but ultimately untrue.

In 2002 an archivist documenting eyewitness accounts of 9/11 asked me to write my version for her project. In my account, I formed carefully crafted sentences filled with bleak metaphors and sad similes; my archival audience would have chills; they would moan, "ooh and ahhh," over my depictions of flecks of ash breathed in …dust-covered disorientation, hands to chest…the soaring and seared birds on fire over shoes, hundreds of empty shoes. My archivist stopped reading after one paragraph, "For God's sake," she said, "you are not on DEF Jam Poetry. Slap yourself into reality. I just need the facts; rewrite this; take a breath, and this time tell it straight." Later when I read my second telling in her document, I barely recognized my voice; my truth was cold and humanless without my southern accent long-drawing the images, and without my very being behind every utterance, silence, pause, and panicked punctuation. Truth had not been captured. This version was too calm, too peaceful; what had been a fractured reality – structures toppling – had been rebuilt into words; incoherence now cohered a little too seamlessly. I knew then if I wanted the singular "I" to come in between the signified and the signifier with creativity and presence gesticulating dramatically, I would have to soul-search the telling of truth, not just in my creative nonfiction, but also in the genre as a whole. I would have to look the "I" right in the *eye* to see if it could ever be believed.

When I first began in the academy, I was shocked to hear such derogation about creative nonfiction. I let a professor convince me a mix of self and truth (even in language that is too literary) was simply an oxy*moron* – a moronic enterprise, merely an

I-I-I ego machine gun shooting the bull's-I of bullshit. "Creative nonfiction," she advised, "relaxes scholarly prose. It's what the comp/rhet scholars do. The first person singular in publication has a mixed reputation. It's not serious scholarship."

And so I caved into the gossip about the genre; I policed my academic prose, frisked it fiercely for any hint of subjectivity until I wrote in an academic speak imitating theoretical jargon. Learning a me-less English was like a second language I stammered to translate (badly) into my writing. My paragraphs were pulseless, my compositions corpses, rigor mortised with stiffness and unbending epistemological epiphanies. Much of this time, I did not believe or like a word of what I wrote, for I was alienated from my own text, and my readers too must have been alienated as I bullied them (just to fit in – a sort of scholarly peer pressure) into submission. And since I didn't know who I wanted to be in the academy, I remained mute in the corner of a classroom or in the margins of my texts fearing the guards of the gates would blow their whistles at any time, catch me in their search lights to expose my apocryphal and posturing scholarship. Where then did I belong in these hallowed hallways with my measly me-filled language? This is what my "I" was (still am at times) up against as a writer and a teacher in the academy: the battle of objectivity versus subjectivity versus credibility. "Where is the tenor of truth?" I called out with echoes of no answers; the cliché Edvard Munch figure with so much screaming chaos around me, I was ready to jump the graduate school bridge. I was stuck yet moving in some circling hermeneutics of no closure. I neither trusted my positivist attempts to make knowledge, nor my subjective ones. I began to exist in a state of *reductio ad absurdum*. "There is no absolute truth," ranted in my head, but that rant in itself is an absolute truth. I was reeling with thoughts

such as, There is no squared circle or circled square, but I can imagine one, create it through imagistic language; therefore, my creativity has made the circled square a nonfiction. I think it; I write it; therefore, it exists. With theatre of the absurd taking place in my mind, I knew I had thought about it all too much. Just as when a word is said over and over again until it is degraded to gibberish nonsensical sound, I had backed truth and creativity into some existential black hole until I didn't know what either meant anymore. The signified and the signifier were no longer speaking to each other.

I began to read everything I could on and of creative nonfiction: the criticism and research of Peter Elbow, Jane Tompkins, Patricia Bizzell, Sondra Perl, Victor Villaneuva and many more. (I read the composition and rhetoric scholars because I wanted to know if by incorporating so much creative nonfiction into in my courses I were properly preparing my students for higher education.) In many of the articles I read, the authors used the first person singular. I also read critical pieces with no first person singular, yet I had to double-check to make sure, for the voice filled the prose, the prose fulfilled the imagination so much that it seemed someone had declared with a blatant "I" his or her presence. It was as if luminal had been sprayed: fresh fingerprints on page after page appeared in formal scholarship; the subjective speaking to objective, face with non-face, mouthing facts with imagination. Robert Root writes, "The most pronounced elements of creative nonfiction are personal presence, self-discovery and self-exploration, veracity, flexibility in form and literary approaches to nonfiction" (xxiv). Perhaps I could get comfortable in this genre. Thus, I tried tentatively to see if I could *still* some truth by mixing the subjective with the objective, but the more I *essayed* the more I distrusted. I thought to myself, "Here is my truth trapped in black blocks of Times Roman, squared

neatly with one-inch margins, freeze-framed on 8' by 11' paper and stamped with my personhood, yet still there is too much circling within the square." I knew I would rethink, retell, rewrite, revise my position through time only to look back and laugh at this fixed finished product. It is impossible, I thought, to trace the breathless moody motion of self's truth; I am running beside it rather than in one place on top of it to tamp it down into one firm, tree-stump-of-a-root in the ground; and if I am conforming to/reforming truth as fast as it comes to me, then I am in a constant state of doing and undoing. Furthermore, if all truth be told, I wondered if my ego just couldn't accept the fact that it must gracefully exit the stage for once. Why did I have to be present in every word? Could I not possibly envision a single sentence living without me? Did I have to vaingloriously take a standing ovation with every syllable? Am I that much of an in-love-with-my-own-voice Diva that my capital "I" has to threaten the purity of the whole production? And if so, Why then would I put my faith in such a narcissist's genre that in itself reveals quite truthfully it cannot be depended on? I needed to look further into it.

Chasing Non-Definitions in the Academy

It is difficult to trust what cannot be definitively defined. Robert Root writes:

> Perhaps we can picture its throbbing, pulsing, mercurial existence as the locations on a series of intersecting lines connecting the poles of personal and private, the diary and the report, the informal and the formal, the marginalia and the academic article, the imaginative and the expository. Creative nonfiction essays would be located on these lines somewhere within the boundaries set by neighboring genres, not only 'the three creative genres' of fiction, poetry, and drama but also the 'expressive'

> genres of diary, journal, and autobiography and the objective genres of traditional (as opposed to literary) journalism, criticism, and polemic and technical writing. (xxii)

When I read the above quotation, I wrote in the margins next to the passage a sarcastic comment: "Well this narrows down the definition. Creative nonfiction has an identity crisis. It's schizo!" Where is the cut off line between the poles? What if I bring too much artistry to the information, or too much imagination to actuality, too much personal to the report, too much expressive to the transactional? Or what if I mix too much transactional with the expressive, then will my writing lean towards non-creative-enough nonfiction? Creative nonfiction is *non*sense, I thought, suffering from an un-discipline disorder. When I say to my students and colleagues I write creative nonfiction, I have no way of controlling their definition of the genre. Should each nonfiction writing or scholarly assignment that I give to my students come with directions about how to make the mix, for if the definition and mix are left up to us, what then are the repercussions? Will we have created some alien genre barely recognizable, its face stitched together from too many body parts, a monster of our own making? "I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision – I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together" (Shelley xxiv).

It is the closed-minded *non* prefix that leads to confusion. *Non* works well with words such as *nonsense*, *nonchalant, nondescript;* it is an exact negation of the root. Yet *non* melded with *fiction* is more complicated since "we cannot define it by breaking down its etymology" (Root 243). *Not* fiction has two many moving parts to be pinned down

with one commanding *non*. Root claims, "Definitions almost by definition are never definitive":

> Most dictionaries claim that non-fiction is simply everything that is not a more specific and circumscribed form of writing (not fiction) but none explain why all other things it's not (for example, also not drama and also not poetry) aren't included in the term (for example, 'non-fiction/poetry/drama'). The Random House Dictionary's third definition tries to compensate for its exclusiveness with inclusiveness, at least in regard to bookstores and libraries – 'including nonfictive narrative prose and reference works'– but it still makes non-fiction a rather compendious category. The first definition tries to narrow the field somewhat, but every qualifier is problematic: 'narrative prose' (as opposed to forms that are 'non-narrative' or 'non-prose'); 'opinions or conjectures' (as opposed to incidents and accidents and experiences and events); 'including biography, history, and essay' (but not limited to those three? And excluding all others?)…Most attempts to define nonfiction emphasize the non-ness of the genre, what the genre is not, rather than what the genre really is – "an entity rather than a nonentity" (Root 243).

Jocelyn Bartkevicius takes this logic further:

> The string of assumptions goes like this: Fiction is 'made up,' and thus crafted, invented, 'made.' Fiction is art because its creator draws upon imagination. Nonfiction is "not made up," and thus recorded, reported, 'unmade.' Nonfiction makes itself, the writer is a mere tape recorder or

> camera. Or, in cases where the material of nonfiction needs some shaping, the writer draws upon reason and logic alone.
>
> Such assumptions are in part an issue of terminology. 'Fiction,' the root word, comes from 'fingere,' to form, mold, devise. 'Non' simply means 'not.' Thus we get the implication that nonfiction is not formed, molded, or devised. Although this 'non' negates the term 'fiction,' it is not the strongest available prefix. 'Dis,' which implies expulsion, as in 'disfrock' or 'disbar,' would give us disfiction, a genre deprived of fiction, even, perhaps, expelled from it. 'Un,' which means 'against' or 'anti,' would give us unfiction, a genre opposed to fiction. Nonfiction, looked at in this context, is not deprived of fiction or opposed to fiction, but simply…not fiction. (255)

Yet the title "nonfiction" from the start labels itself with a white lie, ironically with a bit of fiction. As has already been discussed, creative nonfiction borrows from fiction, scene dialogue, inventive craft and artistry – formed, molded, devised. "Creative nonfiction is at once flourishing and invisible, set and contested. The genre that embraces the often paradoxical nature of the self is itself often paradoxical (Root 234)." It is all this negation skulking around nonfiction that makes it untrustworthy. Bartkevicius believes that "to many our genre is ill-defined and thus invisible" (258). Scholars in an attempt to circumvent the lagging non-ness of the nomenclature have invented a new title for creative nonfiction, the Fourth Genre. The term, however, has not caught on. It conjures up some Twilight Zone episode where we enter a fourth sphere filled with aliens whose stories we take back to earth that no one believes. It evokes images of fourth world

countries primitive and impoverished – the "other" who is oppressed, usurped by powerful first worlds. With the title "Creative Nonfiction: The Fourth Genre," *non* and numerical naming doubly do not work together since the former negates at the same time the latter relegates. Bartkevicius adds to this logic:

> There remains…an unsettling nuance to 'non.' While calling someone non-American does not brand them an enemy (as calling someone un-American would), it still suggests that they are other. A non-American is a foreigner…Nonfiction is to fiction as non-American is to American. Thus, nonfiction is the stranger, the foreigner (or alien) in the land of fiction. What's more, in both cases, the root word is the point of reference. Many writers and editors add 'creative' to 'nonfiction' to mollify this sense of being strange and other, and to remind readers that creative nonfiction writers are more than recorders or appliers of reason and objectivity. (255)

Thus it came to me: I should stop concentrating on the negative *non*-ness *non*sense of the genre that gets us nowhere *(reductio ad absurdum*) and think of creative nonfiction as a positive that offers myriads of ways to reach truth from everywhere. We are not limited. I would simply have to close my eyes and trust it, wear it for a while and find that sure-footed fit to take a bold step into the floorlessness of it – to free-fall unflinchingly. Free-falling has never been easy for me. When I was little I could never do the slumber party trust game where you close your eyes and fell your body with absolute heavy-tree-falling abandon into the arms of the person behind you. People are fallible. Arms are thin. Little girls have catty agendas and would love nothing more than to drop me on my head. It is now I can play that game and fall headlessly, but only if I know for

certain who the person is behind me, how big the muscles are, how pure the mind. It was this way with creative nonfiction; I had to know it inside and out, have it lift some weights; I had to test its fortitude, put its integrity through the wringer before I would ever let it catch me. I admit I don't trust creativity completely for its freedoms are susceptible to abuse; fiction is the devil on the shoulder that beckons us to play with it to satisfy our art or to corroborate as we fabricate. And memory is the mime in the mind stretching, bending and performing illusions that seem all too real; therefore, with eyes in the back of my head, I have had to practice reading, writing and teaching creative nonfiction to know how to avoid the hard-floor-hitting pitfalls.

Eventually, gingerly, I began to think of creative nonfiction as a resourceful genre; it's a sort of starfish with many arms, eyes on the tips of those arms, seeing and flexing in different directions, all at the same time, all bound to one body, cut off an arm and it simply grows another. Creative nonfiction, like self, is cellular: it divides mutates and morphs mimicking the movement of memory, self, and truth which in turn mutate, morph and divide the very second we write or read. In *The Art of the Personal Essa*y, what Phillip Lopate writes about the personal essay also applies to creative nonfiction: "Here you have the reverse of that set of Chinese boxes that you keep opening, only to find a smaller one within. Here you start with the small – the package of flaws and limits – and suddenly find a slightly larger container…" (32). I have begun to understand that once we open up this reverse Chinese box to examine the contents, we will come to understand the genre, accept it on its own terms and thus find a trusted place for it in our work, our pedagogies, and in our English departments, so that creative nonfiction can

find, in all its unsettledness and otherness, a home. Ironically, it is the problematic nature of creative nonfiction that gives it power and fuels potential for endless possibilities.

Let's Get Personal: Implications in Our Writing and Pedagogy

Even though I grew to respect the genre's porousness and to not be intimidated by "the frustrating, epistemological and ontological questions" (Anderson xxi), my writing literary nonfiction with full-throated confidence in the academy was at first tentative. I began to slip a little creative nonfiction into my critical discourse, a trial paragraph here and there in which one could faintly make out my face. I found I was out of practice; my expressivist attempts were too self-conscious, even apologetic (no muscle, no definition), just a puny sentence paling in the middle of an argument daring itself (one two three go!) to express itself in bold. But through the years, I persisted until in one conference, I went native. I told myself it was only a reading (words ephemeral in the ear, nothing of permanence or in fine print for an audience of mostly strangers). I wrote about the power of creative nonfiction and the reader's reaction to reading it. Before I began to read my paper, my knees were shaking, my lips were too close to the microphone; a puff of air garbled my first word which was "I." "IIII," I cleared my throat, pulled my mouth away from the spongy cushion of the microphone to unlock my jaw, and with my long-drawn southern syllables, I argued in my native tongue. Here was my mix: narrative, with anecdote, with theory. Rhythm, alliteration, empiricism, classical rhetoric, ethnography, cultural criticism, autobiography, a little purple prose, and a touch of Alabama melodrama; and for the first time in the academy, I trusted my argument, for in it I exposed the very process I had undergone to reach my truths – the means of meaning making that got me to the end. In this narrative of truth-finding, I included meta-truth,

meta-method calling attention to how, when, where, and why my ideas were finally achieved. I contextualized my argument in all its flesh and boned humanness, fallibility and searching. There it was, the real story, the whole story. In short, it is what I am doing now, right now in this dissertation.

Peter Elbow posits that "in discourse that tries to render experience, or language that conveys to others a sense of their [writers'] experience – or indeed, that mirrors back to [writers] themselves a sense of their own experience from a little distance is just as valid as traditional discursive practices even though different purposes are served" (qtd. in Spigelman 64). I agree with Candace Spigelman when she contends in her essay "Argument and Evidence in the Case of the Personal" that the personal and the narrative "actually serve the same purposes as academic writing and that narratives of personal experience can accomplish serious scholarly work…narrative in its various forms is a logical and legitimate mode of argument, appropriate to the academic writing of both composition scholars and their students" (64). Spigelman argues that experiential (and in my mind experimental) academic discourse should not just substitute (or even merely supplement expository renderings) but should stand side by side as an equal. No longer should creative personal scholarship be considered the bastard child in the academy, scoffed at scholarship, compared to "positivist research paradigms" (63). It is not the purpose of this dissertation to disparage formal academic discourse, which we all know at its best, is awe-inspiring in its elegance, eloquence and objective power. As David Bartholomae expresses, academic formal writing can be "pure, muscular, lean, taut, the language of truth and reason; academic writing – language stripped of the false dressings of style and fashion, a tool for inquiry and critique" (*Crosstalk* 480). I agree with

Bartholomae, yet the hegemony of the academic traditionalists has had deleterious repercussions. However, in contemporary times literary theory realizes the impossibility of making meaning through the impersonal and thus takes into account social constructionism which acknowledges the way knowledge is created by individuals and groups: "selves, knowledge, discourse, readers and writers are inherently influenced by social forces acting on them, thus meaning-making becomes a product of these forces" (Trimbur 454). Writing cannot be impersonal (decontextualized) if race, gender, politics, class, sexuality, discourse communities, culture are informing the interpretations of those producing this writing. Jane Tompkins in her famous piece "Me and my Shadow" furthers this argument:

> Alison Jagger gave a lecture recently that crystallized the problem. Western epistemology…is shaped by the belief that emotion should be excluded from the process of attaining knowledge. Because women in our culture are not simply encouraged but *required* to be the bearers of emotion, which men are culturally conditioned to repress, an epistemology which excludes emotions from the process of attaining knowledge radically undercuts women's epistemic authority. (384)

Through the years, I have heard the attitudes of minorities and women in the academy towards formal academic writing and its ossified language. I have made a point to collect those voices from 2005 to 2009 and have combined the quotations in the following:

Subject Versus Object

Can't breathe, can't think; I'm fake.

Have jargoned myself into a corner of the page so I am saying this: (i) elide, posit, foreground, expound, contend that (i) am positivistically reified, right out of my skin.

…am obfuscated, smoke-screened, quantified, paraphrased…

I close my eyes and nod my head as if I am really listening.

I am methodologized, robotisized, lobotomized…

with a strap-on in tighty-whities; standard written English size.

…rationalized, revised, homogenized, ventriloquized,

subject turns to object for "knowledge is an abstract representation of objective existence": isn't it? Go figure…

…down-sized, finalized, essentialized, militarized…

Who is this palimpsest pink man on my page wearing a tie?

Am compartmentalized, ostracized, and over and over again revised …

My last breath; hence, thus and therefore, here endeth the self.

Tompkins writes that we are halved into public and private selves. If the public self does not write in the traditional tongue of academia then we risk not being heard at all. As has already been stated, Spigelman contends the personal and the narrative can indeed achieve serious scholarship and valid conclusions, yet Spigelman argues her case with impersonal hierarchal speak, holding court and making her case for the personal with the impersonal. The fear of loss of authority, of subversiveness in her self-*less* research contradicts her very defense. However, Tompkins risks the subversive label and argues against a rhetoric of absence with a rhetoric of presence: "The criticism I would write would always take off from personal experience. Would always be in some way a

chronicle of my hours and days. Would speak in a voice which can talk about everything, would reach out to a reader like me and touch me where I wanted to be touched" (386). Tompkins does not write in what Ursula Leguin terms the father tongue while decrying that very tongue. What Tompkins terms the "deification of the speaker" creates an alienating "authority effect" (388), one that is almost imperial in that it lords over the argument leaving little room for exchange of ideas, or possibilities of "other" viewpoints. She says of this authority effect, "I cannot describe the pretense except to talk about what it ignores: the human frailty of the speaker, his body. His emotions, his history; the moment of intercourse with the reader – acknowledgement of the other person's presence, feeling, needs" (388).

Peter Elbow in "About Personal Expressive Academic Writing" writes a cogent defense of expressive discourse in the academy furthering Tompkin's argument. He acknowledges that indeed objectivity in the academy is becoming passé, for few scholars "believe they can achieve objectivity – or that this view from everywhere-and-nowhere is even a desirable goal" (279):

> For many deconstruction toppled the idea that we can be straight in language as we attempt to build orderly meaning. Narrative scholars 'attack' the assumption that thinking is best when it is structured in terms of claims, reasons, warrants, and evidence. Narrative is just as good a form for thinking. Since we are paying attention to the way we actually make thought, we open academic discourse to the process of thinking about thinking. Much ethnography now takes into account the individual race gender class voice and thinking, and the researcher herself reveals her

biases, her discoveries, her thought processes at how she arrived to her conclusions.

This then gets personal. Yet with all the doors opening for the "I" to be escorted into, the academic journals are still locked. "The death of objectivity has not catapulted academics into publishing personal expressive writing in learned journals" (Elbow, "About Personal" 279). Elbow contends we hear over and over from our educators that there is no one shining truth, or one correct interpretation, and we are encouraged to bring our ideas and voices to the table. We hear encouragement for more heteroglossia, yet if we do bring our everyday multi voices, our Gasconia to the academic journals, we risk (Montaigne-like) being accused of tainting the Latin. Wendy Bishop believes the use of the first person singular is a sign of entitlement and success in the publishing world in that it is reserved for those bigwigs who have already proven themselves with hardcore acclaimed objectivity**.** It's that over-used defense: since Picasso could draw the perfect form that exactly creates reality, he then can break that form into distorted fragments with his subjectivity and we respect him. He has earned/proven the right to order the world with his first person singular vision. Yet singular vision does not always translate to world vision. This is the danger of the first person singular and its liberty: In freedom, it can occlude. It can become one little powerless "i." Single. Exclusive. Blinded by its very own closed subjectivity.

David Bartholomae in his famous debate with Peter Elbow ("Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict of Goals") claims the first person singular and expressivism has the potential to be idealistic in that the writer fools himself into believing that the individual mind is a solitary entity of power and originality when really

we are constructed from the culture of power. "Expressive writing inherently tempts writers into myopia, self-absorption and aggrandizement – tempts them to forget difference and the socially constructed nature of the self" (480). The "stories of our lives" are products of TV, books, and "Culture and History." "To offer academic writing as something else is to keep this knowledge from our students, to keep them from confronting the power politics of discursive practice, to keep them from confronting the particular representations of power, tradition and authority reproduced whenever we write" (481). The expressivist writer then engages in one big note-to-self monologue to the world; the "I" pretends to speak only for himself when really a collective inherited we/they is inextricably (unbeknownst to the author since he is so occupied with the self to be aware of the outside) entrenched. It is like a form of insidious plagiarism as the solitary author takes credit for all the hand-me-down voices that have created him/her. Bartholomae questions the power of creative nonfiction and the "I" when he writes:

> Should we teach new journalism or creative nonfiction as part of the required undergraduate curriculum? That is, should all students be required to participate in a first person, narrative or expressive genre whose goal it is to reproduce the ideology of sentimental realism – where a world is made in the image of a single, authorizing point of view? A narrative that celebrates a world made up of details of private life and whose hero is sincere? (486).

Bartholomae is not calling for academic writing that is the "unreadable, created by the unspeakable…i.e. stuffy, pedantic, the price of a career"; he is calling for writers to examine the "ways in which their writing constructs a relationship with tradition,

power and authority – with other people's words" (503). It is only then that writers will learn not to merely reproduce a truth that culture has already prewritten – a conveyor belt truth spit out of some Orwellian factory. An I-I-I same old story convincing itself that it's not.

This argument makes me recall a time I was walking down the street and a young actor type was dapperly skipping along near me, oblivious to the outside world and ears around him, singing at the top of his operatic lungs, "I Gotta Be Me." I wanted to turn to him with, You are not being *you* by singing that same old Sammy Davis song that no one wants to hear first thing in the morning or ever. Go be *you* somewhere else. I agree with Bartholomae. The *singular* first person can get so caught up in styling and fashioning language – dressing self up, vainglorious preening meaning that truth becomes blinded by the I-just-gotta-be-me self. I admit I have been guilty of this and will be again. It is a danger with expressivist writing and creative nonfiction: you never know how tall the top hat on the ego will be once you let the ego into the formal affair. I also agree with Peter Elbow's rebuttal to Bartholomae that it is important to create a free (Utopian) space in a writing classroom where students are given a "kind of invitation to *pretend* that no authorities have ever written about their subject," and to pretend momentarily that writers have full authority of their own texts" ("Being a Writer" 496). Yet Elbow wears that top hat at times; as he advocates for expressivism and counter-argues Bartholomae with personal narrative, he enjoys the sound of his own voice a little too much, his eyes spinning with self as he generalizes about expressivism and composition pedagogy. His truth gets compromised slightly for those students (who predominantly come from elite backgrounds) in private institutions; isn't it a bit redundant to create a *free* writing

environment, an atmosphere free from composing for and against an authority, for students who were born and bred into a class where they are the authority? Wouldn't it be better to expose the power structures that form the writing self in order to free these students from perpetuating those very structures? These more privileged students could use a dystopic dose of Bartholomae inviting them to question and distrust their narratives and their privileged situatedness; to confront "the power of discursive practice…and the particular representations of power, tradition and authority reproduced whenever one writes (Bartholomae 481); and finally to encourage these students to be less manipulated by cultural forces at the same time they learn to do less manipulating themselves of cultural forces. On the other hand, many nontraditional writers in public institutions could use a Peter Elbow to the ribs, a nudge to encourage them to forget repressive authority for a moment in order to find this rhetoric of presence rather than one of absence. Here is where I agree with Elbow. It has been my experience teaching and writing in the CUNY system for the last ten years that minorities know all too well how culture acts on them, replays and mass-produces them. It is these writers who benefit from finding a freedom in this Edenic writing, from trusting language rather than distrusting it in order to enter an elitist tradition (that has traditionally excluded them) with a newfound authority, with fearlessness and yes singularity, so they are situated in centrality rather than in mass peripherality. Elbow writes:

> Personal writing leads to public discourse that is more open and cooperative, less dug-in and with less posturing – as a result leads to more engagement of people with each other at a more honest level…there is a natural connection between the individual and the community. A

> community or social collectivity that is not made up of individual consciousnesses with individual agencies is some kind of mystical group consciousness or oppressive blob collectivity. ("About Personal Expressive Academic Writing" 284)

Elbow then offers a compromise:

> The social and the individual need not point fingers at each other so that one is right the other is wrong. This is "hierarchal thinking: an either or structure (where there is a winner and a loser); it is possible to have a both/and stance – one that permits "embracing the contraries." (See Elbow's *Embracing Contraries*). For the personal and the social are reciprocal – if not in every case, at least frequently and naturally. That is, it is as natural that they support each other as they fight each other (just as the activity of generating ideas can naturally support the activity of criticizing ideas, or writes the process of relinquishing control can naturally support the process of achieving control…Paul Connelly…writes in the same breath about the goal of 'liberating the individual' and 'building bridges…establishing community.' In saying this, he is not struggling to overcome a dichotomy – he's not building a 'yet' structure but an'and' structure. He insists on the natural connection between the individual and the community. ("About Personal" 286)

I think that embracing the contraries is indeed an admirable goal – "one of maintaining *non*dominance and to heighten difference…insisting on keeping opposition or contradiction unresolved" (Elbow, "About Personal" 285). Yet, I am not so sure that

this connection about which Connelly writes always comes naturally between the individual and the community. In the following section I will include parts of an essay I wrote when I was an undergraduate to give an example of how the mix of the individual and the social (Elbow and Bartholomae), the first person pronoun with all its singular vision did indeed form a very uncomfortable, unnatural connection between me (the individual) and the community. Through this example, I explore the reasons this mix of personal, objective, the social and the private can clash so that we end up in an either/or no man's land of understanding. I will then deconstruct this old *essaie* of mine in order to reveal what I have gleaned from creative nonfiction, and how I could have achieved more of a both/and truth to prevent "fighting among readers, and between readers and writers which tends to diminish real listening" (Elbow 287), and, I would add, real learning.

Know Thy Self but Know Thy Reader

As an undergraduate, I attended a small liberal arts university in Tennessee: Sewanee, The University of the South. I was drawn to this college because of *The Sewanee Review* and the writing groups I could perhaps participate in. Sewanee was also in my neck of the southern woods, and I felt I would be at home. I could not have been more mistaken. Sewanee was the redneck of the woods. There were no Bartholomae/Elbow debates to inform our writing professors. In fact, there were no debates at all. We simply wrote *up* to white men in gowns (Sewanee has often been called the Oxford of the South). I quickly caught on to this culture; I was expected to be a southern belle product of it. *Coming out* was for debutantes, not for the powerful voices of strong women, gays, African-Americans. We all learned we needed to please.

I was invited to give a reading to students and faculty on a piece I had written on Zora Neale Hurton's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." The reading was recorded live on the university radio. My robed audience expected the formal analysis from the abstract they had received. The night before the reading, I added creative nonfiction to the concluding pages. I incorporated my experience as narrative proof to support the text. My piece was a mixture of literary analysis that evolved/devolved into personal cultural criticism. I had no idea then what I was doing. I just did it naturally, naively, ignorantly with no theory to thick-arm me. I was out of control with my own text, but this did not lead to, as Elbow writes "a natural process of achieving control." Included below is the introduction and conclusion of the piece I read to an audience of my peers and professors: (Forewarning: I was an unseasoned undergraduate.)

Creation Myth

Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" reads like a creation myth; the little girl Zora at the beginning of the essay leaves her Eatenville/*Eden*ville (a town of Oleanders, exclusively colored where she was everyone's Zora) for the city of Jacksonville "where she was no more"; "she had suffered a sea change" (36). The symbolism is all too obvious: Book One, Genesis – and God created the universe; they ate from the tree and thus "disembarked" (36) from the bliss of ignorance into a genesis of never-ending dark awareness. It's a well-known, stone-etched story, and we therefore expect the age-old moral: birth into the world hurts. However, Hurston topples our expectations. Her dark *genesis* is not tragic. Hurston breaks away from the same old "sobbing school" of the "Negrohood" (36) narrative as she recreates the colored self into one of pride rather than one of pain. "I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow

dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all…Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world – I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife"(37). And in six pages Hurston creates her universe. Zora then becomes a god-like narrator as she rises above the pain of pigmentation and takes ultimate control of her birth into blackness.

(I then went on to analyze the specifics of the text, a straightforward literary analysis, but then it got personal; it got social, as the following will reveal):

…A *Washington Post* writer quoted Langston Hughes: "To many, of [Hurston's] white friends, no doubt, she was the perfect 'darkie' in the nice meaning they give the term – that is, naïve, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly colored Negro…But Miss Hurston was clever too." It was in response to Hughes's comment that Hurston wrote this head-lifting powerful piece "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." I wonder now as I am speaking to you, if Hurston ever reached those white friends, and if they really listened to how it feels to be colored Zora. I also wonder what audience is listening to me/her now, what readers here at the University of the South in 1985 have Hurston on their bookshelves. What professor has her on his syllabus? I question if white students this far across the Mason Dixon Line have ever asked themselves how it feels to be colored *them*? Two years ago I left the safe haven of home (a bit more north than Sewanee) and entered into the realm that promised higher education – into a place where the grass is a serene green spreading golf-course-like, spotted now and again with structures that resemble churches; Sewanee is a space of peaceful contemplation, reflective sacredness in that it is an institution backed and landscaped by the Episcopal Church; Sewanee

prides itself with an unspoiled terrain in the mountains of Tennessee. It is here I believed my own creation myth would begin; my introduction to adulthood sanctioned by nature and church, would be peaceful. But my story is not the above – that one of the green, godly serene. This is the knowledge I have gained from my "higher" (now lower) education. It's a cliché southern narrative with a predictable plot, a predictable ending – biblical indeed in its intransigent inheritance. I will let Hurston help me supply the answer to the implicit question in her title "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." I will tell you about this college's colored *me's* from what I have seen. The few black people who attend this university sit, walk, eat, take classes together; form their own small fraternities/sororities – would never bother with the mainstream ones since they know all too well they will be *black*-balled before they even enter the door. *Nigger* is said under breaths; *nigger* is said loudly. The campus police stop and search the cars of African-Americans, but the good ole white boys driving drunk get a wink and nod and a "run along home." The library does not check identifications of white students, but often checks the identifications of black students. And to the professor who closed his window that late night when he heard my sobbing over a black student surrounded and then assaulted by the SAE (a.k.a. in my book the KKK fraternity) – to all those window-closing professors, the ones who are educating us, I will tell you how it feels to colored *them*. A bloody eye, a stitched lip, a bruised knee and much humiliation as we begged the nigger-chanting, power-sotted boys to stop.

If this is equal Edenic education, I do not want it. I do not want to be degreed and cum-lauded in redneck racism, but I now sadly am. Yes birth out of the garden and into knowledge for me has been cliché painful. So I ask you, What myths surrounding our

education do we need to uncreate? What *dark* truths need to replace those myths? Or does the predictable plot just blind-eyed continue? Zora Neale Hurston was a brilliant writer and anthropologist, for a moment she tried to change the typical sobbing story, yet at the time of her death she went to her grave unsung and poor, nearly forgotten. She is well known today, but it is my belief not many truly care to *feel* her color here. Thus at the University of the South, Hurston's proud renaissance into black identity becomes a humbled and hushed story (thus a sobbing one for me), for too many people here have closed windows. Cliché indeed.

In my essay, without knowing it, I had used too much Elbow and not enough Bartholomae. My piece made an impact and raised awareness but only with those who wanted to be aware. I was preaching to a tiny white choir with my bleeding-hearted (give-myself-chills) homiletics that in the end caused more harm than good. The non-minority students became defensive. (SAE fraternity boys threw rocks and toilet paper rolls at my window while chanting late-night invectives.) The professor who closed his window on the noise of that violent night never said a word to me. The African-Americans did not react to my essay in the way I had anticipated (I had imagined stand up and cheer scenarios – teary and regal gratitude in the eyes of the black students as they proudly shook my hand.). A few of the black students did thank me for my well-meaning courage, yet most cold-shouldered me with a condescending, How dare you little white girl speak for us – tell *them* how *we* feel, as if we are trembling *yes massa* mutes. If they were not thinking this, I now think this for them and have rewritten and revised my essay

in my mind through the years. If I were to suggest revisions to my young self, I would write back through time and offer the following:

1) Keep the first person singular in control. The story of southern racism is a collective one. It is not localized within the campus of Sewanee, nor should this story be individualized through your "I"/eyes. You do not own this narrative with your self-righteous world-ordered vision. With your concluding diatribe, you conclude indeed, for you do all the thinking for your audience as you make a mean meaning for everyone; you set up a combat of your truth versus their truth which only leads to a fight to the death of any possibility of the unresolved – of considering another truth. Instead, you put people in their cliché places and out of defensiveness and defiance they will stay there.

2) Bring more Bartholomae to the bigots. Examine the collective narratives culture has created for us, and how through this exploration we can begin the undoing of the predictable plot including that of your own narrative. Attack your narrative. It, too, is socially constructed, nothing more than some stand up and cheer sentimental cliche you have inherited from books and film: the white heroine confronts the face of injustice and delivers a crowd-pleasing catharsis with one epiphanic punch-in-the gut speech; and the good ole boys, or the Nazis, the chauvinists, the racists, the bullies, the wife-beaters, the child abusers etc… or those who stood by and did nothing bow their heads are caught in red-handed, red-faced shame. The victims of oppression then deliver flowers to your door. Your I-gotta-be-me narrative with you starring as the heroine is not truthful in that the outcome you wrote for, hoping to achieve was unrealistic/idealistic; it did not happen. Pointing fingers with your selective personal specifics is *point*less. You cause fighting between readers/audience and writer, between the community and the individual. It is the

collective story that needs to be critiqued, analyzed, historicized, theorized, so that perhaps we can find a compromise and begin to see other ways of constructing knowledge, knowledge we communicate rather than dictate. Like Bartholomae, we should question our narratives and examine how and why they are formed. It is through this distrusting deconstruction that perhaps a trusting reconstruction can occur and we can learn how not to be replayed, played with, written by power politics. Just as Hurston veered off the beaten narrative track that culture had paved for her to find a new way to look at self in the world, we too have the freedom to surprise ourselves as we reroute/rewrite our way into alternative versions and visions.

3) Conclude your essay with wondering, rather than preaching your teaching. Use the hopeful conjunction "if" to set up the subjunctive tense of doubt, possibility, the unresolved, something like this*: If* we were to deconstruct the conflicting plots culture has prewritten for us, then we may begin to rewrite them in our minds, break the tired thread of our socially constructed stories and open up possibilities of creating/birthing new narratives not yet realized. We are in this narrative together. It is our story to raise a window to in order to listen through.

If only I had first practiced creative nonfiction before I landed in the pitfalls. It is now I can see in hindsight how not to abuse the freedom of creative nonfiction. I have the desire to go back and take that student (who is I) aside to educate her on when creative nonfiction in scholarship goes too far and when subjective truths using scholarship as a platform (as a defense) overbear, overpower and lose their ability to communicate. Now I know a little more. Thus now when I teach those students writing of and on creative

nonfiction, I am careful to reveal the learning process I underwent: I am careful to teach that the mix must fit, not just the writer, but also the reader of that writer in order for meaning to come together in the best of all possible ways, for only then can our disparate truths and modes of making meaning hear, reach, reform one another.

Peaceful Pedagogy: A Truce with Truth

(Implications of Reading Creative Nonfiction)

Now when I look back on my travels and travails of learning to write academic creative nonfiction, I have discovered that before I could write with a confident "I," I first had to learn how to read texts with an "I." I had to learn how to stop depending on others (professors, scholarship, criticism) to reach my interpretations of a text. I have re-read many of my essays from the past and now realize that my understanding of the texts was inherited from years of learning to see through other "I's." It is when I began to trust my own original ways of reading the world that I then began to write my readings with presence. It is this lesson that I try to impart to my students.

I begin this section with more warring and hatred. I end this section with a truce. Bear with me.

Each semester that I teach an expository writing course, I am confronted with hatred for texts. The first day of class I ask students if they like to write. Two or three hands go up with an affirmative, yet with a qualifier, "but only for myself." The majority then slings a litany of slander my way against reading and writing in the academy. I listen. I nod my head and then ask my students to break down the formal rows of desks, and we put the chairs into a circle. The more seasoned writers roll their eyes, for they know well this cheesy threadbare technique that is meant to establish/force

communication. They look at me as if I am that uncreative creative writing teacher who will make them write in their journals every day about how they feel. Others in the class, the ones who looked forward to the hiding and cowering, lower their eyes at me with fear, for I have invaded their privacy and exposed their shyness. Then I tell my students my story – the one that fills this dissertation. (I teach them with creative nonfiction.) I offer a synopsis of my rocky relationship with writing and reading. I tell them that even today as I write my readings of a text, I approach my computer to begin working and the blank screen is so very blank. The cursor blinks at me until I stare at it so long I envision it is a middle finger silently flipping me the bird, "You can't write it; you can't do it." I tell my writers that I experience what I call the grunts. I sit in front of the mocking screen and grunt but nothing comes. It's labor (I've been through labor so I know); it's contractions in my brain so distended with ideas, I have to stand up and stretch away from the computer to eat a cookie, make a phone call, clean a floor that is already clean. I eat another cookie that I do not want and return to the screen to that cursor still flipping me off and to an emptiness around it stammering in wordlessness; I write a sentence and then delete. Write delete; write delete; eat another cookie, grunt, make a phone call, eat a cookie, call, pray, clean the toilet bowl, write, delete, cookie, come back and grunt and then it comes: that first sentence. The cursor is happy; it winks at me now; the tired delete button takes a breath. One cookie-filled sparkling clean sentence opens its eyes and the spawning begins. All that chaotic churning, no longer fertilely challenged, forms a complete body and I produce. Yet it is only with the period finalizing the last word of the last much-cursed and grunted page, do I love writing. I'm truly, profoundly, primordially in love for a while, even though I know full well I will forget that solid love instantly

when the labor (and it will) begins anew. How, I ask my students, are we going to get you to that one sentence, that one love-filled sentence (because if you can write one, you can write a million) that makes the labor worth it? They blink at me in response just like that benighted, disgusted cursor, and I know they have absolutely no faith in the written word, and I know that once again, I have my work cut out for me. I know I must encourage them to not only find a sense of self in texts, I also must get my students to trust that sense in the long run. It is the same anxious process of achieving that first eye-opening sentence of anything I write; I will grunt for a while in the pedagogical purgatory before the gates open, and hopefully all the bodies see their own light. We start with finding self in reading.

The rest of this chapter will explore the importance of finding self in reading. (The implications of students writing creative nonfiction will be examined more fully at the end of Chapter Three.) Once we are able to see our identity in a text, it paves the way for trusting and engaging our identity in writing. In my courses, I tell my students how reader-response theory directed me to teach texts in such a way that honors multiple, nontraditional, creative readings and produces in the end (as opposed to reproduces) writing that is not afraid to clear its throat to interrupt (a lofty literary conversation, long ago begun) with self-truths that are original, creative, confident, and in some cases even passionate. Needless to say, in my courses, we read mostly creative nonfiction (essays and memoir) in order to understand how writers through the ages grapple with self and truth in their works. As will be discussed with more depth in the subsequent chapters, creative nonfiction with the first person singular speaking to the reader establishes an

intimacy in that the reader becomes a confidante to the author – I to I. This intimacy is crucial for certain student bodies.

It is important in public institutions (like the one in which I teach) where a large portion of the student body is (as Victor Villanueva writes in *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*) "a victim of a school system that has traditionally failed to educate the women, the poor, or the person of color at the same grade of efficiency as others" (621). Thus most of the students come to my composition courses having read very little. Some have even graduated from high school having hardly written a single paper. Their writing experience has been limited to short answer test questions, or they have spent their time in English classes preparing for standardized tests, namely the Regents Exams. The last thing these students need is an alienating text. For those students defined by the *under* and *un* epithets, that is – undereducated, underprivileged, untraditional, unused to the academy – it becomes crucial to choose texts that will not leave these students *under*whelmed and *un*enthusiastic, *un*connected to. The composition class is an appropriate place for instructors to demystify textual truths so students learn that meaning isn't so hidden they can't find it; and that literature isn't so scarily sacred they must bow down to it? Elbow writes in his article "Being a Writer vs. Being an Academic: A Conflict of Goals":

> I think I could and probably should read some strong important works of cultural or literary significance in my first year course…I must fight the tradition of treating these readings as monuments in a museum, pieces under glass. We must try to come at these strong important texts – no matter how good or hallowed they may be as much as possible as fellow

> writers – as fully eligible members of the conversation: not treat them as sacred, not worry about doing justice to them or getting them dirty. …To be blunt, I must be sure not to "teach" these texts… I think we should be treating texts the way academics and writers treat them…using them, rather than serving them. (491)

Very early on in my teaching through the CUNY system, I knew *what* I wanted to achieve with my students, however it was the *how* that had me stumped. I had no idea how to reach this student body so they would invest themselves in any text. How was I going to teach my students to *use* a text rather than *serve* it, be chummy with it, rather than worship it so much they can't even begin to talk about it, let alone write about it. It was in a 19th Century Literature class – my first year of teaching – that I decided to practice a little of what I had gleaned from reader-response theory. I loved (and still do) that reader-response has been called the populist theory. Patricia Harkin writes in "The Reception of Reader-Response Theory":

> All the theories of the theory boom took the power of meaning-making away from the author (exclusively), but only reader-response gave that power to any ole reader. Reader response offered no principle for ruling any reading out. In its radical theoretical effort to include feminist readings, post colonial readings, Latina readings and so forth, reader response theory (in its liberatory aspect) called on us to accept them all. (22)

With Harkin in mind, I informed my students I wanted to discuss readings more than I wanted to analyze the literature; thus I required my students to keep reader-

response journals. I read to them passages from Louise Rosenblatt's *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* so my students would think of "reading as an event occurring at a particular time, in a particular environment, at a particular moment in the life and history of the reader." Rosenblatt writes:

> The transaction will involve not only the past experience but also the present state and present interest or preoccupations of the reader. This suggests the possibility that printed marks on the page may even become different linguistic symbols by virtue of transactions with different readers. Just as knowing is the process linking a knower and a known, so a poem should *not* be thought of as an object, an entity, but rather as an active process lived through during the relationship between reader and text. (8)

I wanted my students to address Rosenblatt's questions in their journals: "What within myself…what temperamental leanings…what view of the world, what standards, made it less or more easy for me to animate the world symbolized by the text? What hither-to-untapped potentialities for feeling, thought and perhaps action have I discovered through this experience?"(22). Finally, I wanted my students to find that "the possibilities are infinite," that through a text, the reader – any ole reader – "can achieve a certain perspective on his own preoccupations, his own system of values" (21). I let my students know since the reader has so often been excluded, as Rosenblatt writes, "from sharing the "limelight" with the author and the text, the focus in this course would be mainly on the once, but no longer, invisible reader.

It always surprises me when theory works in reality. I never believe it will really happen. Even though I gave the class the above lessons and talked a good reader response, I admit I came to class prepared to "teach" *Jane Eyre*, to serve her up on a silver platter, rather than *use* her as everyday ware – old habits are hard to break. I had my little note cards memorized; I had read all the famous critics whom I was planning to ventiloquize, and there wasn't one student response I wasn't prepared to answer or lecture to. Then James W. raised his hand and read a few sentences from his reader-response journal that put my solipsistic teaching tyranny to an end. "I'm sorry," he read, "please excuse my French, but I have to just say it: Mr. Rochester is a fucking loser! 'Jane Jane, my nervous bird. My frantic prayer…' What kind of man talks like that to a woman and expects to get anywhere?" I panicked. I became the nervous bird with a frantic prayer. There I stood in front of the class with nothing to say –- a deer in that "limelight*"* I had gone on and on about. Jane Eyre was alive and kicking in the Bronx; the reader had stepped out of the 19th Century shadow, and other students were following him. To my amazement, reading I saw i*s* an active event occurring in the *present* tense after all. My note cards instantly yellowed. Jane Tompkins paraphrases and quotes Stanley Fish's argument: "'If the speakers of language share a system of rules that each of them has somehow internalized, understanding will, in some sense, be uniform…And insofar as these rules are constraints on production…they will also be constraints on the range, and even the direction, of response.' The important point is literature *is* the activity that the reader performs and not some stable artifact; 'it refuses to stay still'" (xvii). Indeed, multiple readings were actively flying around the room creating contact/combat zones. Jane Eyre was in the confident hands of my students. They weren't worried about

getting her dirty, being polite to her, or doing her or me justice. They were bringing their own worlds and their own ways of making meaning to the world of the text. And with their expertise mixed with a little of mine – an amalgamation of the best of both worlds – indeed the possibilities seemed infinite. Norman Holland argues, "Interpretation is a function of identity" (qtd. in Tompkins xix). Thus from that semester on, my students and I come to each text bearing our selves, our personalities, our oppressions, our fears, our hatreds and as Barthes writes our "burst of ideas" (29). Lucky Lazarus texts you get to live many lives through ours as we recreate, reincarnate your words, sentences, ellipses, gaps, paragraphs through our own "I's."

I am convinced now that writing reading is a powerful *pre*-text in that it encourages students to write better final texts, since their own unique literacies have been emboldened. I have found that through writing reading, students are not so anxious they run lemming-like away from a difficult text; they no longer seek congregation-like all the answers from the almighty critics, and they no longer turn themselves into pulpy palimpsests as they allow the teacher to write over every thought they ever had.

Barthes asks in "Writing Reading," "Has it ever happened as you were reading a book, that you kept stopping as you read? In a word, haven't you ever happened to read while looking up?" (29). These teaching days I tell all my students about the time when I was in high school and literature alienated or intimidated me: I used to pause and write my name in the margins. While looking up from the page, still reading, the text lingering and muttering in my head, I wrote, "Isabel was here!" Perhaps my reader-response graffiti was an attempt to mark my territory, or it was a hammy gesture to call attention to my reader's existence: Isabel was and still is here! I tell my students I want to hear their

reader existence in their writing, that a disinterested search for the truth does not interest me. I'm a greedy teacher with a long list of wants: I want my students' identities in their readings: their gender, their class, their morals, their ideologies. I want my students to know textual truth isn't so high they can't reach it, and that meaning isn't so cruel it excludes them from making it. I want them to know there is no such thing in my book as the ideal reader who, god-like, gathers from the text one hallowed universal truth that makes the heavens ring, the clouds part and the angels sing. I want them to trust that with time their literary experience will become increasingly rewarding when they have more of a literary past, when they have performed the "activity" and "actively" attended the "event" over and over again. I want them to break the rule too many teachers have reinforced through the years: Thou shalt not use the first person singular in academic writing. I want them to kick this hoary habit that deadens their writing, leaving it stiff with fear, or lackluster with boredom and self-effacement, so that not even an echo of the "I" can be heard. I want to give them the permission to bring to the text the first person *singula*r, so multi-faceted, and fattened it turns into the first person plural. And with a red magic marker, I want to draw them a map, deface every page of their books with a big red arrow pointing to a big red dot: You reader are here! Step this way. With all that you are, take a powerful step into the limelight!

Conclusion with No End

I "conclude" this chapter with exclamatory readership pedagogy, melodramatic optimism, for truth be told, it was only after I (in my long insecure history in the academy) examined my reading process and then Barthes-like killed off the author's terrifying tomblike meaning sealed under solemn stone that I could write my readings. It

was only after I could control my shyness face to face with a hard text, that evangelical-like, I could see the light, and that I, mere I, would dare enter a textual truth anew/askew with my own vision. It takes one to know one, so I recognize that loud moment in the classroom when my students step into self-filled readings and begin to understand the boundlessness of textuality. Truth in text is always a translation. A second-hand literary reality. In *Illuminations* Walter Benjamin writes about texts: "The golden nucleus cannot be translated… Meaning is never fixed…but a real translation is transparent. It does not cover the original, does not block its light but allows the pure language… reinforced by its own medium to shine upon the original with a perfect mixture of fidelity and freedom in which literalness and freedom are united"(8). Indeed the knowledge that there is no trapping truth is freeing (no holds barred) in that there is always an opening to slip through and everyone (every *single* one) is invited, not just a select few, to create the possibility. Creative nonfiction (the reading and writing of it) exposes the truth for what it really is, manmade/self-made producing and reproducing in the ever-moving human cycle. Benjamin writes: "The critic is an alchemist practicing the obscure art of transmuting the futile elements of the real into shining enduring gold of truth…" (5). Western epistemologists/alchemists have for so long put a corner on the market of mining truth: the only way to pan the real from the fool's gold is with an objective eye; self is a sifting sin. Yet the almighty task of creative nonfiction (and all that *essays* to fit under it) shows us the freedom to translate truth with subjectivity, objectivity, and finally with hardcore swear-to-God creativity; "the I mixes with the not I" (Elbow, "About Personal" 229). If we read and write paying homage on bended knee to truth's absolute ineffability and inescapable ceaselessness, then we have absolutely learned the hard truth of truth,

and perhaps *this* is the golden nugget where truth comes closest to being… creative nonfiction, not a monster of our own making, but instead a wondrous creation "ever-varied with the powers of nature" (Shelley 14), a truth that never ends; *that* truth to *this* singular I – as a teacher, a reader and a writer – has the potential to become golden. I still need to look further into it – into the ever-varied nature of a relationship that creates wonder.

> I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision—I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together…
>
> So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein—more, far more, will I achieve; treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation…
>
> Were we among the tamer scenes of nature I might fear to encounter your unbelief, perhaps your ridicule: but many things will appear possible in these wild and mysterious regions which would provoke the laughter of those unacquainted with the ever-varied powers of nature. (Shelley 14, 33)

Chapter Two: The Personal Essay: The Moving Truths of Montaigne and Woolf

Two essays can never replicate or contradict each other, for each is creating a unique world.

—George Lucaks

It is an arrogant and foolhardy form, this one-man or one-woman circus, which relies on the tricks of anecdotes, conjecture, and wit to hold our attention.

—Russell Saunders

In this era of prepackaged thought, the essay is the closest thing we have, on paper, to a record of the individual mind at work and at play. It is an amateur's raid in a world of specialists. Feeling overwhelmed by data, random information, and the flotsam and jetsam of mass culture, we relish the spectacle of a single consciousness making sense of a portion of the chaos.

—Russell Saunders

Sed quanto ille magis formas se vertat in omnis tam tu, nate, magis tenacia vincla…

—Georgics, IV, 411-12

A Snowflake Genre

I did the winter cliché thing. I rented a house in Vermont so I could write. There was the armchair by a walk-in-sized fireplace – slippers, long johns, my fat bulldog, Betsy, sleeping by my feet, book in my hands. Outside was the white quiet of snowing. I was reading Philip Lopate's anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay.* Perfect setting, perfect snow, perfect for concentration. Yet the noiseless snow was ruining the cliché; it was distracting me since I kept looking up from my reading and out the window. That quotation of Barthes kept chanting in my head yet again: "Has it ever happened as you were reading a book, that you kept stopping as you read? In a word, haven't you ever happened to read while looking up?" (29). Yes, damn it, I irritably answered him. I read Montaigne and looked out at the snow; then with Shonegan, again, I paused in between her lines to hear her snow landing in bitchiness. I read Didion and snow obliterated with too much whiteness. Barthes, snow; Hazlitt, Benjamin, Thoreau more snow; E.B. White

with snow, and then black with James Baldwin. Gore Vidal, then Dillard and her terrifying apotheosis of nature… until my head was loud and schizo. With so much silent collision, snow and voices falling all around me in an annoying heady Barthesian avalanche. I thought of the cliché about snowflakes: No two are ever alike. "The probability that two snow crystals will be exactly alike, in molecular structure and in appearance, is very minute. And to prove otherwise would not be easy. Each winter there are about 1 septillion snow crystals that drop from the sky" (Roach 1). I thought of the essay in the snow-piled pauses as I was reading while looking up: No two are ever alike, I kept thinking. It's a genre impossible to catch for keeps, melts in your mind and defies a lasting formation.

O.B. Hardison writes, "Of all literary forms the essay most successfully resists the effort to pin it down, which is like trying to bind Proteus" (11). Philip Lopate with his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay* indeed tries to bind Proteus by tidily categorizing the personal essay's common traits from the classical era to the present. Lopate "attempts to put forward and interpret a *tradition* (emphasis mine): the personal essay"(xxi). While I agree with Lopate that the essay is considered a subcategory (a second class citizen) of the formal essay and needs further study, Lopate's attempt to pin the essay into identifying commonalities is too formulaic, too reductive for such an open form. His labeled sections seem bullied by the Goliath genre they are grappling with, for there are myriads of essays (past and present) morphing through his grip. O.B. Hardison compares the essay to a cockroach. "It is tough, infinitely adaptable, and biquitous…The cockroach is a primitive creature. It appears very early on the evolutionary chain. The

essay is also primitive. Roland Barthes suggests that, in evolution of projections of the imagination, it may precede the formation of all concepts of genre" (12).

So it dawned on me there in the too-quiet snowy cabin, loud with textual epiphanies, perhaps the essay form should not be ruled by categorizing systems or anti-systems that have the potential to circumscribe it in choking nooses. To close the genre into systems goes against the grain of the very nature of the essay. Friedrich Schlegel writes of the essay: "To have a system or not to have one – both are equally deadly for the mind. One has little choice but somehow to combine the two" (qtd. in Kaufman 237). Perhaps the essay has *not* evolved packaged neatly as Lopate would have it in a chronological anthology (from Seneca to Richard Rodriguez). The essay has always been an anti-formulaic art form standing alone, a rule breaker never specifically knowing the rules it is breaking or the tradition it is inheriting/disinheriting: endings of essays are only edges from which to jump to the next beginning. Though there is much intertextuality through the centuries, the truth of what drives each style, each essayist to write personally is as complicated as *essaing* to reconcile centuries of idiosyncratic selves: No two are alike. In *Montaigne Among the Moderns*, Marchi examines the influence of Montaigne (the Renaissance father of the essay) on future generations of essays. What Marchi contends about Montaigne's work applies to the essay genre as a whole:

> Montaigne's work…becomes an important link [to future essayists] as they attempt to reactivate cultural tradition, but with the goal of surmounting it, in order to produce their own innovative versions of tradition renewed…the cultural past is allowed to speak only through the intermediary of the writer's innovative positioning.

E.B. White contends, “There are as many kinds of essays as there are human attitudes or poses…The essayist can pull on any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter (qtd. in Core 216); thus, to “put forward” a tradition becomes an attempt to capture an on-going attempt, to form what is not fully formed, to methodize that which should inherently be impossibly un-methodical. Graham Good writes in *The Observing Self*: *Rediscovering the Essay*:

> Like Cartesian philosophy and Baconian science, [the essay’s] observations are free, and do not seek authority from tradition or doctrine…The essay exists outside *any* organization of knowledge whether medieval or modern. In it, an open mind confronts an open reality. An uncertain, unorganized world enters an unprejudiced awareness, and the essay results as a record and provisional ordering of the encounter, but only in a temporary way. Nothing can be built on this configuration, no rules or methods deduced from it…the essay starts afresh every day, every time. Nothing is carried over. (4)

Since the essay defies systems and categories, it becomes a “*sotte enterprise”* (Montaigne, qtd. in Kauffmann 235*)* to discipline it by ordering it to goosestep in a straight line, for it’s an unruly genre; “it’s innermost formal law is heresy” (Adorno, qtd. in Kauffman 231), as it faithlessly goes about rammily roaming (uncontrollably snowing), rediscovering and redefining its identity bowing to nothing absolute. “The luck and play of the essay allow the separate elements to crystallize into a configuration, and each configuration, each essay is uniquely itself and unlike any other” (Adorno, qtd. in Kauffmann 231). Snowflakes and essays indeed.

To Trust or not to Trust: That is the Question?

As we enter into the realm of essay, we get swept up in movement, nomadic movement that has no organized travel itinerary. The world of essay will change plans without a moment's notice, redirect us into fast landings onto fragments of ground only to take off to other ones within pages. The realm of the essay does not offer continuity, but rather discontinuity. Adorno posits that the essay is composed "in such a way that it could always, at any point, break off. It thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented, and gains its unity only by moving through fissures, rather than by smoothing them over...Discontinuity is essential to the essay" (qtd. in Kauffman, 230). The essay genre gives us the momentary as it tracks the pace of experience and self's reaction to experience. Montaigne expresses this point well: "I do not paint [my subject's] being, I paint his passing…from day to day, from moment to moment" (qtd. in Hardison 23.) "The essay's claim to truth is not through its consistency in method and result with an established body of writing. Its method is not collaborative and its findings do not need corroboration. Its claim is to yield flexibility to individual experience. Instead of imposing a discursive order on experience, the essay lets discourse take the shape of experience" (Good 7).

It is interesting that the essay (in all its discontinuity) for readers is such a popular genre because it establishes a complicated (oxymoronic) relationship with the reader in that we must consistently be prepared in entering a collection of works for contradictions and unreliability. The irony here is that even though a personal essay may invite intimacy with the reader, a camaraderie, an empathy/sympathy, at the same time we encounter a slippery slope filled with contingencies along the way when truths and tenants, attitudes, ways of making meaning shape-shift and reconstruct depending on what experience

dictates. At the heart of the personal essay, obviously the "I" makes its presence known, but the "I" approaches the reader as if they have already met; thus long detailed introductions (the complete personal history) are unnecessary. Intimacy can be immediate: the "I" puts itself on the line, shows its face in the words up front and center and does not hide behind objective neutrality or the make-believe of fiction. It's a chummy, intelligent, perhaps bleak (if the subject matter is dark) confidante as the "I" engages the reader with knowing confidence; the "I" just begins from any starting point, extending a familiar handshake of truth; however, the reader comes to know only the handshake, not the whole body or mind. So often that handshake has us in the palm of its hand. We want more of this pen-pal friendship from wherever and from whenever the author is writing. I agree with Lopate, the personal essay form "allows the writer to circle around one particular autobiographical piece squeezing all possible meaning out of it, while leaving the greater part of his life story for later milking" (xix); or perhaps that milking never occurs since the essayist chooses to leave us without the full context – only with glueless gaps of moments and moods.

Since humans are motley-minded, made of a collection of identities, we are in constant dialogue with multiple selves as we try to make sense of our conflicting parts. These parts don't always fit together seamlessly; thus a collection of an essayist's works can create a mosaic that seems of multiple minds – upside down and sideway pieces that don't jigsaw together. A reader could be maddened trying to find a coherent narrative line. I think of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper"; the heroine is tortured in trying to find a being and continuity for that being on paper:

> It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions… a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind. The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing. (13)

If we stare at the wallpaper of the essay genre, we will indeed see patterns, but they will veer; they will trick our eyes:

> It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you. I start, we'll say, at the bottom, down in the corner over there where it has not been touched, and I determine for the thousandth time that I *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion. I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of. It is repeated, of course, by the breadths, but not otherwise. (12)

The essay is fickle; it is a squirmy image of passing; "An essay is 'essaying to be,' in Emerson's conceit, 'and thought thinking about itself.' It is the enactment of the process of accommodation between the world and the 'I,' and thus it is consciousness real-lizing itself" (qtd. in Hardison 26).

Why then do we put our faith in a genre constantly "real-lizing" itself, circling itself with no predictable beginning or end? Emerson writes in his essay "The Circles":

> Every action admits of being outdone. Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens. Our moods do not believe in each other. To-day I am full of thoughts, and can write what I please. I see no reason why I should not have the same thought, the same power of expression, to-morrow. What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most natural thing in the world; but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many continuous pages. Alas for this infirm faith, this will, not strenuous, this vast ebb of a vast flow! I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall. (413)

Isn't a circling self, "with no end in nature" (God one minute, weed the next and with 'moods that do not believe in each other') the very clay of truth? Perhaps this is why the essay is so widely read. Perhaps this is the reason the reader can find such instant intimacy with the writer, because our ways of malleably molding meet somewhere face to changing face. Mustn't we then, as Derrida posits, be prepared to "begin wherever we are," (qtd in Hardison 12) to trust in a ceaselessness that might reveal in a flashed fragment one thing that is momentarily finite?

Chapters Two and Three will explore how essayists bring these questions (symbolically, rhetorically, blatantly) to the forefront. It is not the purpose of my inquiry to provide an exhaustive study of the essay through the ages; to do so would dilute this study. I concentrate on a few essayists and their specific works to reveal the genre's

provisional nature, its experimentation with rhetorical strategies; its skeptical (ironically consistent) questioning and questing for ways of representing the inconsistency and relativity of truth. I will explore how authors problematize the limitations of writing a life's fragments in a medium that di*stills* in print that which is mobile; and through these writers, I will "put forward" (not a tradition of the essay) but instead, what Dudley Marchi writes about the genre, "points of contact between texts…shared concerns, stylistic and thematic affinities, as well as ideological convergences between various historically and linguistically dissimilar texts" (3). As the essay moves across and breaks new boundaries, it creates a tension between tradition and innovation/renovation as writers absorb elements of the past to then reform, reincarnate those elements into something endlessly singular. I will examine the problems for the reader as we engage to such a polyvocal, polygamous genre with no ring on the finger of that handshake of truth it proposes – no monogamous promise to us with one voice, style, or vision or self. Why then do we trust such a player of a genre? Why then is the genre so popular and widely read? Perhaps it's a typical love affair with a bad girl/boy syndrome: we are attracted to what we can't quite have, so still we keep trying and moving forward in the chase for a clearer understanding in an attempt to consummate what we hope may be requited in the long run.

I offer no closed conclusions, for if we are faithful to the genre, we then should be patient with no straightforward answers. We should let the snowy genre slip and slide with all our might, release it from its holds-barred state, so it may continue trying and re-trying to be again, and once more again – a world without end… thus never a married amen. I look back to the beginning of all the motion.

Chapter Two will now examine particular essays of Montaigne and Woolf in order to reveal earlier attempts to capture truth's motion/commotion. I land on bits and pieces of the respective authors' works to reveal how these writers have paved the way for other authors to experiment with representing and constructing personal truth. (Chapter Three will concentrate on more contemporary essays to trace where all this movement through the centuries has flown us.)

The Bowel Movement of Truth

A student of mine with utter surprise said in class after we had read Montaigne's "On the Power of Imagination," " I wish I could say the following in Latin: I can't believe this 16th century guy is talking about farting, masturbation, hard-ons, wet dreams, and transsexuals. Am I reading this right? He goes all over the place and is hard to follow." My students have commented in their reader-responses about Montaigne, that before they even began reading, they had expected the text to be something different (I have collected a list through the years): "stodgy, old professor stuff"; "ancient and boring"; "nothing that I can identify with"; "Alexander Pope-like bullshit from those fat survey books that we are required to read." It never fails; my students are always surprised by how much they can identify with Montaigne, and it never ceases to amaze me that Montaigne can flex his mind from 1508 into 2009 to reach twenty-year olds. That's power. That is movement. That a 16th century candid codger could compete with Ipods, video games, rap and hip hop, Facebook and even win a head-turning acknowledgement of respect ("this dude's cool") speaks volumes – volumes of essays that, indeed, speak volumes of imagination and lasting truth. This is the power of Montaigne. He has the "power of imagination" to convey "the entire form of man's

estate" ("Of Repentance" 315): "It often happens that I see and distinguish the characters of my friends more exactly than they do themselves. I have astonished at least one by the pertinence of my description, and have given him information about himself" ("Of Repentance" 315).

In the *Essays*, Montaigne meanders through his mind's lifetime, gradually testing the potential of self-portrait and its ability to communicate a universal recognition of self to his readers, his *Essays* a conduit through the centuries that provoke a collective reader response of (as one student wrote), "Oh yeah I'm that way too." "Consider it a great thing to play the part of one single man" (Seneca, qtd. in "Of the Inconsistency" 160). Donald Frame contends, "Montaigne's aim is not confession but communication" (v.); thus the way to keep communication alive is to keep it moving. Emerson said of Montaigne's *Essays*, "Cut these words and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive" (qtd. in Frame ix). "A faithful portrait must not be static but kinetic" (Frame v). Montaigne writes:

> Every movement reveals us. That same mind of Caesars, which shows itself ordering and directing the battle of Phasalia, shows itself also in arranging idle and amorous affairs. We judge a horse not only by seeing him handled on a racecourse, but also by seeing him walk, and even by seeing him resting in the stable. ("Of Democritus and Heraclitus" 133)

Montaigne's essays do have a wet-paint quality to them as if the artist just left the room to return momentarily with something else to contribute, rearrange, paint over, and keep breathing. When I read Montaigne, I always think of Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase.* The work reveals the cubistic movement of a woman in blurry

fragments in various stages of descending the stairs and calls attention to the motion of art as it breaks with the still-life of tradition. Montaigne writes in "Of Repentance":

> Now the lines of my painting do not go astray, though they change and vary. The world is but a perennial movement. All things in it are in constant motion – the earth, the rocks of the Caucacus, the pyramids of Egypt – both with the common motion and with their own. Stability itself is nothing but a more languid motion.
>
> I cannot keep my subject still. It goes along befuddled and staggering. With a natural drunkenness, I take it in this condition just as it is at the moment. I give my attention to it. I do not portray being: I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another, or, as the people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute. My history needs to be adapted to the moment. I may presently change, not only by chance, but also by intention. (313)

Montaigne's subjects travel all over the place throughout the *Essays* as a whole and within one essay. From loose stools, to God, to kings, to premature ejaculation, to death, children, education, women, sex, everyday irritabilities, grief, vanity, sycophants, blowhards, politics, traveling, liars and yes furtive farting. His subjects are limitless, and the *Maitre de la Digression* swarms us with an anarchy of his associations; however, he does not offer absolute objective truth about his topics in the strict literary tradition that dictated 16th century discourse. Montaigne rebels against the classic "methodical argument, scholastic rigor, and linear development" (Marchi 25), the Latin of his day. He is the eternal Gasgogne-speaking quotidian skeptic, living within the chaos of civil and

religious wars, a time when the strife of truth must have seemed too impossible to reconcile; thus he, at the "I" of the storm, responded to chaos's circling with his truthful tryouts of self. Montaigne does not orbit around the world with universal wisdom sealed in god-like omniscient authority; instead, he attempts to loosely order the world around him – the mundane self at the very receiving/perceiving ungod's-eye (I) center, a mere human bulls-eye. Herbert Luthy writes in "Montaigne, or the Art of Being Truthful":

> "*Ramener a soi*" is one of the key phrases of the *Essays,* untranslatable in its full range of meaning; it means to draw back on oneself, to draw to oneself, to take to oneself, but it contains also the logical meaning of a movement of thought from object to oneself, and the physical gesture of picking up, holding or embracing. So Montaigne draws to himself what would escape him: his life, his feelings, his thoughts, his book, his very self; and his reproach against the licentiousness of thought is nothing else but that he wishes to pass beyond him and his limitations in order to fix himself in the unlimited. He, Montaigne, wishes to remain with himself. (13)

"On the Power of the Imagination" depicts this *ramener a soi* movement well, yet the movement does not come as easily, peacefully or *organ*ically as Montaigne would like to have it. The self can go way off course "to rush wildly to and fro in the ill-defined field of imagination…it presents so many chimeras and imaginary monsters, one after another, without order or plan…"("On Idleness" 27). Or the self can get so trapped (constipated) "in the close connection between the mind and body," it cannot find a healthy release. In "On the Power of the Imagination," Montaigne strains to achieve a

curative for the "irregularities" of imagination's movements and a balance between the mind and the body, between the retentive and the involuntary in order that the mind and body establish a truce, "come to rest, and …grow settled" in an idle freedom that will allow Montaigne "to suit [his] matter to [his] powers" (47). Montaigne searches for a release in his essays overall, and we learn early on through "On the Power of the Imagination" that this release of imagination has to take on the powers that be: mind over body is no easy feat, i.e. the literal physical body as well as the body of politics, and the body of writing.

Montaigne has an antagonistic relationship with the imagination. The imagination is unfaithful to the body as it betrays it by leading it into embarrassing sexual states ("the hand often goes where we do not send it") of impotence, premature ejaculation, and wet dreams (43):

> We sweat, we tremble, we turn pale, we flush, beneath our imagination's impact; deep in our feather beds. We feel our bodies shaken by its onslaughts, sometimes almost to the point of death; and fervent youth grows so heated in its sleep that it satisfies its amorous desires even in dreams,
>
> *As if they were performing the entire act, the mighty wave gushes forth and stains their garments. Lucretius, iv, 1505.* (qtd. in Cohen 37)

Even Kings, Counts, Saints and priests fail to master the fractiousness of imagination. The imagination fools the body into a state of disease (dis-ease) and spreads like a contagious virus despotically replicating:

> It is another matter when the imagination works, as it sometimes does, not on one's own body but on someone else's. Just as one body passes a disease to its neighbor, as we see in the case of plague, smallpox, and pink-eye, which one person catches from another—
>
> *When their eyes behold others in pain, they feel pain themselves, and so many ills pass from body to body.' Ovid, De Remedio Amoris, 615*
>
> so, when the imagination is violently disturbed, it launches shafts that may hit a distant object. (45)

For Montaigne, it is the terror of imagination that fuels the malignant movement of the mind all the more, permitting it to best the body, the matter, the member. One must use an imaginative "counter-battery of enchantments," "monkey tricks," "talismans" to deceive the imagination into submission/remission. Ironically, to restore health and ease to the imagination and the body, one must "out-maneuver" imagination with it's own weapons, and have hard (pun intended) faith in the healing power to exorcize the mind's deception with more deception. (42) The result is *enemic* ejaculatory movement in the gut of the bowels, the penis and the soul. Montaigne's example of a patient's relief through beguiling those bowels tells all:

> Why do doctors begin by practicing on the credulity of their patients with so many false promises of cure, if not to call the powers of imagination to the aid of their fraudulent concoctions? They know, as one of the masters of their craft has given to them in writing, that there are men on whom the mere sight of medicine is operative.
>
> All this nonsense has come into my head through my recalling a tale told me by an apothecary who served in the house-hold of my late

> father. He was a simple man and a Swiss – a people not given to vanity and lying. He had known, some years before, a merchant of Toulouse who was sickly and subject to stone, and who often resorted to enemas, which he had made up for him by the physicians in different ways according to the phases of his disease. When they were brought to him none of the usual formalities was omitted; and he often tried them to see if they were too hot. Imagine him then, lying on his stomach, with all the motions gone through except that no application had been made! This ceremonial over, the apothecary would retire, and the patient would be treated just as if he had taken the enema; the effect was as if he actually had. (44)

As Montaigne expounds on imagination, his very text depicts the process of his imagination. He travels from one outlandish example to another; the examples themselves, along with their lawless movement through the text expose the carried-away power and depth of Montaigne's mind. Montaigne, with the diverting gift of his imagination, performs "the entire act, the mighty wave [of imagination} gushes forth," past constraint, tyranny, "sedition" (43), and he performs a monkey-trick of style to achieve in the end a salubrious discharge of free-flowing ideas. Ejaculatory indeed! Thus, Montaigne's essays allow him the panacean release of his *matter* in the body of writing ("I am myself the matter of my book") (3). He challenges our matter to be diverted by his member; sexuality and textuality go hand in hand ("the hand often goes where we do not send it."). It is up to us to find our own *hand*ling of this reading – out or in, up or down, He gives us that imaginative power.

How then does the reader respond to the" excrements of an aged mind, now hard, now loose, and always undigested?" ("Of Vanity 355). Is our matter able to suit itself to Montaigne's powers? We readers go through a rhetorical workout with Montaigne and with his powers of imagination. While moving from one topic to the other often without any transitional help from the author, the reader must maneuver through these moments of what seem at times like stream of consciousness: "We do not go: We are carried away, like floating objects, now gently, now violently, according as the water is angry or calm" ("Of the Inconsistency"147). The reader steps into that Rosenblatt limelight as Montaigne challenges us to take on an active role. Montaigne will not always guide our lulling or white-watered route; instead, he lets us find our own way, our own control as we get carried away through his mind. Montaigne empowers the reader's imagination to suit our minds to his mind's process. It's one more monkey trick he plays on us, yet the trick honors the reader in that he trusts our capability to be within the circle, and he welcomes the freedom of our minds to make sense of his self's swirling around us. He challenges our matter to be diverted by his member; sexuality and textuality go hand in hand ("the hand often goes where we do not send it."). It is up to us to find our own *hand*ling of this reading – out or in, up or down:

> It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I…I seek out change indiscriminately and tumultuously. My style and my mind alike go roaming…
>
> I want the matter to make its own decision. It shows well enough where it changes, where it concludes, where it begins, where it resumes, without interlacing it with words, with links and seams introduced for the benefit

> of the weak or heedless ears, and without writing glosses on myself. ("Of Vanity" 375)

Consider the reader warned from the very start of all this motion. Montaigne begins Book One with a note to the reader: "This book was written in good faith, reader" ("To the reader" 24) Indeed, we need to have good faith in order to keep in line with an author who offers us no narrative line. His epic of the self begins *in medias res* with every essay. He contradicts himself throughout his books. Marchi sums up the problems the reader faces as we try to have good faith:

> On nearly every page of the *Essais* one encounters paradox: Montaigne tells us that he is not a writer yet spends most of his life writing; he speaks out against the vanity of all things, yet writes copiously about himself; in his essay on presumption he chooses a non-presumptuous person for analysis, himself; in his essay on repentance he tells us he does not repent; he says time and again that he is horrified by innovation, yet in title, genre, tone, and subject matter, he produced an absolutely new work; he tells us how he loves life, yet remains detached from it; he accepts the principles of becoming, yet searches for stability; he professes intellectual humility, yet takes great pride in his writing project – the enumeration could go on. (7)

I will enumerate where Marchi left off. Montaigne's humility seems preposterous at times. "There is not a child halfway through school who cannot claim to be more learned than I," Montaigne says, yet we are no fools; we know we are in the hands of a master who can wield a text and the subject matter with the vernacular of his day or who

can "Latinize" if he so chooses. This is no everyday man with a book that is "simple natural ordinary…without straining or artifice" ("To the Reader" 3). We begin to roll our eyes a bit at this faux ordinary honete homme who renounces bedecking and studied posture and who apologizes for his defects, his lack of memory, knowledge and for his writing that is merely "the excrement of an aged mind, now hard, now loose and always undigested" ("Of Vanity" 355). Furthermore, Montaigne gives us a false sense of present tense, a mind as it is just now forming truth. "As for the natural faculties that are in me, of which this book is the essay, I feel them bending under the load. My conceptions and my judgment move only by groping, staggering, and blundering" ("Education of Children" 19). He continues:

> I take the first subject that chance offers. They are all equally good to me. And I never plan to develop them completely. For I do not see the whole of anything. Nor do those who promise to show it to us. Of a hundred members and faces that each thing has, I take one, sometimes only to lick it, sometimes to brush the surface, sometimes to pinch it to the bone. I give it a stab, not as wide but as I know how…Scattering a word here, there another, samples separated from their context, dispersed, without a plan and without a promise, I am not *bound* to make something of them…("Of Democritus and Heraclitus 133, emphasis mine).

Yet he has *bound* his essays to make something of them – a bound book – one that he revised obsessively, pedantically, not idly, but with that *straining*, meticulous artifice. "Most critics agree that the *Essay's* apparent spontaneity is deceptive; and even after it had been achieved, he continued to edit his text with great attention…he fully

intended to publish his work" (Rider 25). With his painstaking construction, his contrivance eventually shows itself. Why then do we the reader tolerate such hypocrisy? Why then do we trust this faux humble sage who "speaks as an ignorant inquirer," and who vows to pull down all masks but so often manipulates us with masked monkey tricks?

Because he tells us so. "I do not teach, I tell."

He tells us how we should read him; he exposes his writing process ("I assure you I should very gladly have portrayed myself here entire and wholly naked") ("To the Reader 3), and we are given instructions – a meta-reading lesson spread throughout the essays – a mazy reading map that he confesses has no direction or grounding truth. And I get that. I just do. I realize through monsieur, it is universal (so like me, so like us) to contradict:

> Not only does the wind of accident move me at will, but, besides, I am moved and disturbed as a result merely of my own unstable posture; and anyone who observes carefully can hardly find himself twice in the same state. I give my soul now one face, now another, according to which direction I turn it. If I speak of myself in different ways, that is because I look at myself in different ways. All contradictions may be found in me by some twist and in some fashion, bashful, insolent, chaste, lascivious, talkative, taciturn, tough, delicate; clever, stupid, surly, affable; lying truthful; learned, ignorant; miserly, and prodigal: all this I see in myself to some extent according to how I turn; and whoever studies himself really attentively finds in himself, yes, even in this judgment, this gyration and

> discord. I have nothing to say about myself absolutely, simply, and solidly, without confusion and without mixture, or in one word. *Distinguo* is the most universal member of my logic. ("Of Inconsistency" 155)

We, the reader, are allowed into the Montaigne game to play however we choose. With his first essay ("To the Reader") dedicated to us, he establishes a fast connection. He does not offer us a ponderous stilted read, caged in conjugations of Latin. He approaches us with his everyday language and thoughts, his "defects" and his "natural form," and he promises us with the first line of his essays that these attempts are "written in good faith" (3). No, we, the reader, are with this very lively author (not at all deadly dated): we can enter and exit at any time and then enter again and still we are part of the game with no time lost. It is not a simple cold, closed case of the author is dead centuries ago; no, we the reader can replace that shroud with fresh-faced indented linens of reader identity to keep the text alive. Montaigne's *Essays* reinforce our own movement, and together we keep building, not that stolid stone monument the author so hated but something embryonically forming within the every day of any lifetime, something universally imaginable, that which we are all unholy and un-wholly made of no matter who we are or where we come from. We become an ideal reader in fragments (our fifteen minutes of Montaigne fame); we get him at one point; we lose him at another. *Distinguo* indeed. That is the point. And by the end, we have that faith – a fallible faith, here and there, and from now to way back when, back to when he told us to move along with him; and so we trust him *still* even if, by God, he can't stand *still,* and even if we can't to him completely answer why he had us with his first word, or why we trust him in all his self-doubt and contradiction. "*Que scais-je*?"

Essaying to Move Right Along

I am still there in that ridiculously overpriced cliché cabin in Vermont. Slippers on, snow piling, bulldog ever-farting at my feet ("Parfait," Montaigne dirait.). I am by the fire, by my reading window; I can see the constantly claustrophobically, igloo-like snowing. So I move to another chair. I move to another century. I turn to Woolf to see if I can find Montaigne-influenced movement in her. Yes I see it. And then I don't. The snow constantly falling in sameness lands in new shapes and obliterates. I get it, another truth. It will slush by tomorrow I know.

Many scholars have bridged a connection between Montaigne and Woolf. Dudley Marchi writes in *Montaigne Among the Moderns*:

> Much of Woolf's critical writing is in the manner of the Montaignean essay, and her aims and means are often produced in a skepticist mode. The weighing of probabilities, the suspension of dogmatic judgment, and the exploration of different sides of a question, qualities essential to her essayistic techniques, are attempts (essays), not closed systems of understanding…reflective lyricism abounds in her writing, chances are taken in the desire to explore flexible coalitions of thoughts that invite engaged redevelopment. (223)

Woolf, like Montaigne, wrangled with the traditions that tyrannized writing and snubbed, not only experimental expressive forms of writing, but also women writers. Woolf works within this tyranny of the past at the same time she tries to overthrow it. Like Montaigne, she creates mobility in her writing as she questions the ways of representing the self and truth. She reveals through her rhetorical strategies the very process a writer experiences in order to achieve a "true self neither this nor that, neither

here nor there, but something so varied and wandering," for as she writes, "it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves?" ("Street Haunting" 261).

Montaigne laid the foundation for the great self-indulgent experiments. He threads himself across four centuries into modern day. Though we recognize a "Montaignean" "under-texture" (Marchi 218) a subtext or a pretext to some of Woolf's essays, overall Woolf, in many of her essays, veers far from Montaigne in language, style and form so that we hear little great grand-fatherly influence. Woolf would never fart in her essays. Truth does not come gushing forth this way and that way. Montaigne's spraying of the ego is not how Woolf felt comfortable freeing the subjective. Woolf uses the "I" sparingly, strategically. Her work is saturated with self, yet often it is up to the reader to find Woolf's subjective truth in her structures, her symbols, her use of personal pronouns, her fictive characters (Judith in *Room of One's Own,* for example) and in her rhetorical strategies. If at times the "I" seems constrained, indeed it is because that constraint is part of the patriarchal culture that creates Woolf's truth. Jane Marcus writes in "Thinking Back Through Our Mothers":

> [Woolf] first learned to say 'we' as a woman. It was not so much liberation from her ego, as she explained to Ethel Smyth, as a liberation from the loneliness of individual anxiety. Thinking back through her mothers gave her her collective identity and strengthened her creative ability. Her whole career was an exercise in the elimination of the ego from fiction in author, characters and readers. It was the expansion of the

> word 'we' in a world of women writers past and future which grew eventually to speak for all the alienated and the oppressed…(11)

For Woolf, the first person singular was associated with the masculine that had the self-appointed power to dictate writing with a forceful ego. Marcus continues, "The ego is the enemy; even in herself, where she fought fiercely to control it, she saw the ego as male, aggressive and domineering. In the psychic drama of mother, father, child, it was an attempt to eliminate the father" (9). It is not so much that the Woolf blushed (her writing dropping a dainty handkerchief at the sight of intimacy) at revealing her private self; Woolf has shown scathing personal power and touching intimacy in works such as "Modern Fiction," *A Room of One's Own,* "Professions for Women," and most notably in *Moments of Being.* "A Sketch of the Past," is so personal that I, as a jaded 21st century reader (living in the Oprah Winfrey era when the private self bares/airs itself on national television), flinch every time I read this passage:

> I thus detect another element of shame which I had in being caught looking at myself in the glass in the hall. I must have been ashamed or afraid of my body. Another memory in the hall, may help to explain this. There was a slab outside the dining room door for standing dishes upon. Once when I was very small Gerald Duckworth lifted me onto this, and I as I sat there he began to explore my body. I can remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes; going firmly and steadily lower. I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how I stiffened and wriggled as his hand approached my private parts. But it did not stop. His hand explored my private parts too, I remember resenting it, disliking it – what is the word

> for so dumb and mixed a feeling? It must have been strong, since I still recall it. This seems to show that a feeling about certain parts of the body; how they must not be touched; how it is wrong to allow them to be touched; must be instinctive. (2014)

Woolf punches us with the personal to then depart quickly from her private pain to immediately include her ancestresses in a writerly rescue (if we need one) of united self and author; she concludes the above memory with: "It proves that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25th January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago; and had from the very first to encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past" (2014). Woolf assaults us with a memory, but within one paragraph, she pulls back to the collective experience of women violated through "many thousands of years." The universal "we" is more important than a selfish *"*I" and its temerity to dare imply that the singular experience is the paragon of all. We readers are a collective chorus in the background of this Greek tragedy, but if we are so inclined, Woolf beckons us to move with her from that relegated position of choral crying to front and center under a shared limelight. "She wants to close the gap, to fill in the abyss which separates the players from the audience, art from life. In an age in which fascism and socialism fought for the allegiance of the masses, she sought to hold history, art and the people in the embrace of the 'we'"(Marcus 11).

Woolf defies the individual male writer who hogs the page with a subjective interior of a blow-harded self. With her feminist sentence that rallies the oppressed to join their work with hers, Woolf does not follow the Montaigne route strewn with his volumes of jam-packed ego and faux humility; "Woolf breaks from Le Pere d'Essai to reveal how

the mother lode of *her* essays can "beat this rugged road," to follow it down (or up) a different track.

In "Professions for Women," Woolf addresses a paper to the Women's Service League about her literary profession. She confesses that beating the rugged road is not easy, for her writing process must constantly do "battle with the phantom woman," a sycophant specter (that her culture has created) who comes between Woolf and her pen:

> She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. (2007)

She calls this Victoria-possessed spirit the "Angel in the House" who must be exorcized from pen and paper:

> And when I came to write, the shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustle of her skirts in the room. Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered 'My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own.' (2008)

Truth then can be won through a murderous pen that must kill this angel. The killing is an act of self-defense – a case of kill or be killed. (We look back on these passages with sad-stoned dramatic irony, for we know in hindsight that in the end the maddened and abused angel indeed succeeded in drowning Woolf.) Truth achieves a different type of purity and sacrifice in that the author must insurrect against custom in order to purely break from it; martyr-like, she attempts to commit the murder of the angel as if to take one for the whole team:

> [The Angel] would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all of these questions, according to the Angel of the House cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must – to put it bluntly– tell lies if they are to succeed… It was far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had dispatched her. Though I flatter myself I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe. (2008)

Though Woolf states that she committed a successful murder, we still see her grappling with the question of how to express truth and the workings of her mind in a discourse and in a profession that has henceforth been usurped by men:

> From that dilemma arise infinite confusions and complications. Energy has been liberated, but into what form is it to flow? To try the accepted forms, to discard the unfit, to create others which are more fitting, is a task

> that must be accomplished before there is freedom or achievement…to pour such surplus energy as there may be into new forms without wasting a drop is a difficult problem which can only be solved by the simultaneous evolution and emancipation of man. ("A Sketch of the Past, qtd in Marcus 18)

Truth gets rustle-*skirted* over and over again. Woolf voices her frustration in trying to find that form into which to put the energy without wasting a drop of being. In "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf reveals the difficult task of capturing the whole of being and that includes the moments of everyday non-being, those "not lived consciously" (2015). Woolf confesses that she tries to find the coherence between the two states. It is through writing that she achieves the union of being and nonbeing, for in writing she finds faith in an unseen phantom pattern (not the angel phantom), but in an unconscious pattern inchoately lodged in nonbeing "hid behind the cotton wool" (2017):

> It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me…a great delight to put severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we –I mean all human beings– are connected with this; that the whole word is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world.

> But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven. Certainly and empathetically there is no God. We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (2017)

Thus Woolf *essays* to reach the whole word, together in a work of art. Since she has apotheosized the word, the truth of the almighty word becomes difficult to attain. Yet still she tries. Writing is not an entire truth but the search for a truth in as many severed parts as she can bind. It is the imagination that has the power to get closest to the essence of being (and nonbeing). Here we hear the echo of Montaigne. In "Professions for Women," Woolf contends that the imagination has that wandering freedom to go anywhere "unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world" (2009), to then bring to the world that whole word it created – a god-like/goddess-like power of creation. It is when she speaks of the power of imagination that the author drops out of the first person and into a third person feminine omniscience (speaking with wisdom for all woman writers). She insists that her audience "imagine" itself a girl "in a state of trance" (2009). She recruits the *you* with the *I,* and in so doing the *you* and *I* become a singular *she* through imagination.

> …*I* want *you* to imagine me writing a novel in a state of trance. *I* want *you* to figure *yourselves* a girl sitting with a pen in her hand, which for minutes, and indeed for hours, she never dips into the inkpot. The image that comes to mind when I think of this girl is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water. *She* was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our

> unconscious being. Now came the experience that I believe to be far commoner with woman writers than men. The line raced through the girl's fingers; her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools and the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. (2009, all emphasis mine)

Yet the imagination for a woman writer in the throes of creating can only go so far. The might of tradition is too difficult to master so that the artistic unconscious state of women writers (where truth lies) gets thwarted; that fishing line breaks, the large slumbering fish of truth gets away from being hooked up to the surface. It's like *coitus interruptus:* insemination of the creation is aborted; it is "condemned," "dashed" and "smashed" "by the extreme conventionality of the other sex" (2009):

> …There was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was aroused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure, she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. *She* could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could work no longer. (2009)

That Angel in the House (no matter how many times you kill it) still in moments inhabits and inhibits the feminine imagination. "Indeed it will be a long time still, I think,

before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against" ("Professions for Women" 2009).

Woolf reveals this fighting of ghosts and this diabolical angel in the essay "Street Haunting." In the work, there is a longing to wander/haunt the darkly-lit streets of imagination, but our path is once again impeded/aborted, and we must return to where we began before we drift too far into the "corner of the mind's ingelnook" (262). Woolf begins the essay in a dire search for a pencil. "No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it becomes supremely desirable to possess one" (256). The pencil offers us a pretext to go "rambling" through the streets of London, and we become imagination *flaneurs* as we travel the windings of London nightlife, and as we move in and out of the various characters' consciousness. "The hour should be the evening and the season winter…The evening hour…gives us the irresponsibility which darkness and lamplight bestow…We are no longer ourselves" (256). We are no longer in a room of our own, the self fixed by stationary objects which "enforce the memories of our own experience" (256). We are not in the past land of static memory "stamped like a coin indelibly"; when we leave the house and "the door shuts on us, all that vanishes." We break the "the shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves" (257), and we are moving in and out of anyone's experience as we walk through the minds of the masses "to become a part of the vast republican army of anonymous troopers" (256), and to bring moments of being and nonbeing brimming. But we should "indulge safely" (256) the text warns us at the beginning of our adventure. We should not dive too deep with our "central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye"; "we are only gliding smoothly on the surface" (257).

Just on the brink of ghosting our way through to offices and houses ("where at this hour fierce lights burn over maps, over documents, over desks"), the text then pulls back; the eye must controls itself; the imagination, as if conditioned, warns itself to be polite and not too intrusive. We are on the edge of entering into the mind, into "the figure of a woman accurately measuring out the precise number of spoons of tea – She looks at the door as if she heard a ring downstairs and somebody is asking, *is she in*?" (258, emphasis mine). The dash in the syntax is telling. We interrupt this woman in her moment of being or non-being. We, the nosy collective women, have come ringing with a desire for an answer to, Is she in?; and if so, What is *in* this *she*?

Woolf could penetrate this figure in the privacy of her drawing room, but we will never know this woman who might have been *in*. Woolf leaves her uncreated as we shy away from the tea-measuring woman and her door: "But we must stop peremptorily. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves; we are impeding our passage down the smooth stream by catching at some branch or root. At any moment, the sleeping army may stir itself and wake in us a thousand violins" (258). There is half a haunting here, a speculative specter dipping toes in this stream of consciousness. The eye (the male I) would not approve of such an intimate prying into the female mind. We hear the defeated echo from "Professions for Women": (*The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. To speak without figure, she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could*

work no longer.) The eye is "not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker of buried treasure." The treasure is that phantom pattern of unconsciousness where nonbeing is oppressed and hidden; the "treasure," is that g-spot of literary feminine being and consciousness/ unconsciousness that is so difficult to discover.

We ramble on to another door. Here, too, we hear that Angel in the House and her pinioned-winged influence. Again we stop politely at the next door of a boot shop where a dwarf is trying on shoes. That old Angel needs to make an excuse, which has nothing to do with the truth; it is simply another halting pretext to risk deeper rambling. "We halt at the door of the boot shop and make some excuse, which has nothing to do with the real reason, for folding up the bright paraphernalia of the streets and withdrawing to some duskier chamber of being where we ask, as we raise our left foot obediently upon the stand: 'What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?'" Will Woolf (at this door) allow us to penetrate more deeply? Woolf permits us. It is here at the boot shop entrance that Woolf pushes through, and we are allowed *in*, to haunt our way into this question of truth through the deformed unfitting body of a female dwarf. We are here knocking at the mind of a dwarf, politely feigning at first as we are conditioned to do, but this time we fold up the bright paraphernalia to withdraw into something duskier for a just a careful moment. What then is it like to be a dwarf? We are allowed to imagine we begin to know:

> She came in escorted by two women, who being of normal size, look like benevolent giants beside her. Smiling at the shop girls, they seemed to be disclaiming any lot in her deformity and assuring her of their protection. She wore the peevish yet apologetic expression usual on the faces of the deformed. She needed their kindness, yet she resented it. But when the

> shop girl had been summoned and the giantesses, smiling indulgently had asked for the shoes for 'this Lady' and the girl had pushed the little stand in front of her, the dwarf stuck her foot out with an impetuosity which seemed to claim all our attention. Look at that! Look at That! She seemed to demand of us all, as she thrust her foot out, for behold it was the shapely, perfectly proportioned foot of a well-grown woman. It was arched; it was aristocratic. (258)

There is this tension of outsider versus insider throughout the text. Not only does the author herself battle with writing on the surface of tradition and with breaking it for deeper waters, the dwarf (a symbol of all the oppressed, including feminine imagination) is an outsider *dwarfed* by society, yet for a brief moment she (the collective she/we) is included, protected, regal, "a Lady," "an aristocrat"; for a brief moment her body is not unfitting but is "perfectly proportioned," and she imagines that "the rest of her body [is] of a piece (*peace*) with those beautiful feet" (259, all emphasis mine). The feet are synonymous with the power of "soothed and satisfied" movement in the body and in the imagination ("satisfied" movement for women and for their body of texts): "Her whole manner changed…She looked soothed and satisfied. Her manner became full of self-confidence. She sent for shoe after shoe; she tried on pair after pair. She got up and pirouetted before the glass…" (259) The "pirouetted" part then becomes the pirouetted whole in the dwarf's mind, celebrating complete self, a fitting self in front of the mirror and the world. "Look at that! Look at that!" the text "demands of us all," and exclaims with pride and "self-confidence." Thus it is understandable why the dwarf (the feminine text) "is ready to use any device to prolong the choosing and the fitting" *(*259*)*. However,

there is inevitably that age-old refrain bringing the repetitive return to the surface: (*There was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was aroused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure, she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her would be shocked. The consciousness of what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could work no longer.)* "The ecstasy faded, knowledge returned, the old peevishness, the old apology came back, and by the time she had reached the street again she had become a dwarf only" (259).

The dwarf, however, "changed the mood" (259) (the mood and truth of the text), and we follow the dwarf out of the shop and into the street, into more minds of the "humped, the twisted, the deformed" (259). Indeed, the dwarf and the author have started a "hobbling grotesque dance to which everybody in the street now [conforms]" (259).

The text asks another question: "In what crevices and crannies…did they lodge, this maimed company of the halt and the blind?" And again we are allowed entrance. We ghost our way "in the top rooms of these narrow houses between Holborn and Soho, where people have such queer names, and pursue so many curious trades, are gold beaters, accordion players, cover buttons, or support life, with even great fantasticality, upon a traffic in cups without saucers, china umbrella handles, and highly-coloured pictures of martyred saints"(259). Now that the dwarf has changed the mood, we are spirited away fast and toppling (as if we can't contain ourselves after holding back for so

long) into one consciousness after another of the everyday real. And like the foot on the dwarf, this part of society is envisioned into being, into something wholly beautiful. We trade the old trophies for these treasures. "Passing, glimpsing, everything seems accidentally but miraculously sprinkled with beauty, as if the tide of *trade* which deposits its burden so upon the shores of Oxford Street had this night cast up nothing but treasure" (260, emphasis mine). We *trade* the former masculine eye/I for this eye/we/she/one that "is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances. Standing out in the street, *one* may build up the chambers of an imaginary house and furnish them at one's will with sofa, table, carpet" (260). This is the power and freedom of the imagination: to peek behind the thick green curtains to the "love making going sibilantly seductively in the darker release of the room" (260); to eavesdrop on "the aged Prime Minister [as he] recounts to Lady So-and-So the affairs of the true history of some great crisis in the affairs of the Land"; to ride on the "top of the highest mast of the tallest ship" (261).

Woolf then pauses for a moment and balks at all this haunting; we are dashed up for a second, against the factual world. "But what could be more absurd? It is in *fact*, on the stroke of six; it is a winter's evening; we are walking to the Strand to buy a pencil. How then are we also on a balcony wearing pearls in June? What could be more absurd?" (261). Yet Woolf answers her string of questions and in so doing defends the true self, the true text, the true essence of being and nonbeing. Woolf's response is "utterly at variance with *his* main being" (261, emphasis mine). Truth is not whole and rational. (What could be more absurd?): "We are streaked, variegated, all a mixture; the colours have run" (261). Woolf's defense against "*his* being" leaves the door open, leaves it up to our imagination to answer since she offers potential solutions in the form of questions. "Is the

true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves?" (261)

Woolf's "Street Haunting" outs us from home to street level to then submerge us into the below. But in the Cerberus-guarded underworld, we know, few women then, could escape, so we *dash* back up after Dante-like dipping our toes. With our toes we test the Lethe stream of consciousness (waters that tell the truth and never let us forget), but quickly lift them up, back to the safety of a mind at home housed in the status quo. And here with the homecoming (the conclusion of the essay), as we approach our own doorstep again, we follow the footsteps of the traditional essay structure: conclusion echoes and reinforces the intro., closes the circle and rounds it to a tidy end. We end where we began, with the pencil. But in all this closure, once again that unanswered question hangs over the text with possibility: "Is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves?" (261) We want to answer our *flanuese*, (with mixed metaphorical myths) our female Tiresias (Tiresias actually lived in the form of a woman for seven years) who stands at the window of a text and can close her eyes, blind herself to convention to make us see more than meets the eye, to make us see what has the potential to brim in the future. We want to answer this author with a rousing yes to reinlessly haunting until we find that feminine fish somewhere in the black holes of the deepest part of the water. Yes, we *could* indulge dangerously, we want to say. "One could become a washerwoman, a publican, a street singer. And what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines

of personality and deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath the brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men?" (265). But our guide takes us safely out of the streets, out of the heart of the forest, back to the landing of our doorstep and into the safety of "the old prejudices folding around us" for the self to become sheltered and enclosed again (265). Yes we could, the text seems to say, but perhaps that door opened and fully entered would be too much of a mind, body, and self to sacrifice – too much for one individual author to bear. And sadly, we know looking back that for the mother Tiresias/Theresa of essaying, this is all too true. But with the last line of "Street Haunting," we also imagine that perhaps she foresaw that the haunting not only *could*, but *would* continue. "And here – let us examine it tenderly, let us touch it with reverence – is the only spoil we have retrieved from all the treasures of the city, a lead pencil" (265). There between her dashes of punctuation is the tender and revered pencil never dashed: the pencil that created pages and pages that have influenced ages and ages…neither here, nor there, but everywhere; through street levels and underworlds of imagination. Such is the lasting truth of Woolf's written wanderings.

Street Walking Home

After reading and writing about Woolf, I wanted to run wildebeest-like away from Vermont and from this cabin of one's own: I needed the stampeded; the "variegated" interplay (to put it mildly) of my big city. I had jonesed there in Vermont for the fast fix of some hard-core *flaneuring* during the time when the peak of night sloppily staggers into the had-one-too-many dawn; that moment when one notices the snow on the streets

can't settle for long because it has been kicked through, yellow-melted, or slushed to polluted filth.

So I came home to my gritty city night. And in my after-hour saunter, I haunted, passing mind after mind. Past the benched homeless man who sat up in shivering sleepiness with alert epiphanies over my "fat ass"; past the puckered-lipped girl making out with her flexing-muscled look-alike; past the Wall Street woman wobbling on her high heels as she talked on her cell briskly, "I am trying… I swear I am"; past the elegant white-haired woman (walking a mutt) with a diamonded hand; I walked past the windows looking through curtains and imagined a student, a janitor, a wife-beater, a house cleaner, a shit head; a social worker, an earthy granola cruncher; a widower, a needled hermit, a mama putting her kids to bed; a dyed blonde crying, a skinny boyfriend dying, a married couple lying; high up, I looked up and wondered what one's view is from there from the high-rises: they make money, for by God, they must, they overlook the river; and then just at Rector Street, right before I got home, I nodded to someone passing me, who gave me a quick smile of late-night, naughty-night complicity… perhaps she too was doing as I was, looking through windows and walking through minds forming line after narrative line of anyone's and everyone's lives.

When I finally landed on my doorstep with so many imagined truths battered about and strewn litter-like – from the Lower East Side across to Tribeca and down to Manhattan's tip – I was on the edgy edge of something my mind just couldn't grip. I live two blocks south of the World Trade Center site, in between confusing extremes – jackhammered with reconstructed reality by day to sacred construction-hats-off, saluted silence by night. The city has fallen, but the city is intact; it keeps building on and on.

Nothing makes sense, I thought; everything keeps relentlessly roiling along. It made me carsick, seasick – my head begging for a stop-still Dramamine calm. "*Que scais-je*?" Montaigne asks. I answered him nauseated that night: all I know for sure, monsieur, is walking, teetering, running, living, regenerating, restive, fidgety, flaneuring, fitful, tossing and turning, stark-raving maddened and moody motion.

Deathless, choiceless and breathless. That is my truth. For now. I might change my mind tomorrow.

Bonne Nuit.

Chapter Three: Falling

The Truth in the Fan

It was a fetid New York's summer day, and I was sitting in a rocking chair in front of a fan breastfeeding my newborn. My chest was sweating with my child's body heat compounded with mine. I rocked and of course found rhythm – rhythm in the hot nursing, the rocking and in the fan. Fans always make me schizophrenic; if you listen to any machine long enough you will hear something. I swear I hear rasped voices in the whirring. Usually one word will whiz around and around and then machine its way into my head. This day I heard the word *falling*. *Falling*, I rocked and the chair creaked, as the baby sucked. Here was my rhythmic song:

rockfallingcreaksuck; rockfallingcreaksuck; rockfallingcreaksuck.

I always think when I hear words in the fan that maybe – like some bladed tea leaves, or some cut-off-a-finger steel Tarot cards – this fanning prophet is trying to tell me something. Gods have spoken; winded voices are coming through my Vornado unit. Perhaps, I should take heed. Falling, I thought, my head fanning around for meaning; we are the falling generation, the falling boomers (no longer the baby boomers), raising children who when grown will be the fallen ones – *rockfallingcreaksuck* – airplanes, bombs, and buildings falling; war falling, earth warming, water drying, economy breaking, flues resisting, antibiotics weakening. *Rockfallingcreaksuck*. My fan-god had whispered the truth: yes we are falling. And just as I had a textual epiphany in Vermont with all that snow falling, here too I had one, for in that back and forth moment of rocking, and in that beating air of the fan, I again thought of Barthes while looking up. Writing and reading in my mind again, between the pauses of milk sucks and doomsday scenarios, I could hear my ideas forming in fast word-making clicks on the computer

down to the very continuing commas. The essay. Falling. I imagined the tight linear structure silted into debris, falling into rushes and then landing into a confluence of language for a second but only to rush along.

I think of Jackson Pollack who painted, not sitting still in a chair in front of palette, but frenetically moving over his canvas, spewing and spraying paint; a cigarette might fall from his distracted lips into the mix – a coin, or a screw…he painted with sticks, with syringes; he painted primitively, resourcefully with whatever he needed to convey the action of representation. He constructed while he deconstructed, and somehow without fully knowing why, his dripped images catch some of us with something with which we identify.

Chapter Three first glances back to an example of the classical linear essay and how it portrays an illusion of truth. I then explore the white-water fall of the essay into its lyrical free-for-all form and how authors convey the movement of truth by throwing at it more and more movement. They combat motion with motion. They grab from anything they can get their hands (and sentences) on: they grab the debris of movement from a writer Pollock palette of self: everyday knick-nacks, a laundry list, an instruction manual, the media, the community, the arts, politics, bumper stickers, advertising. The flotsam and jetsam of life and self, whatever it may be, have the potential to become a textual art form; and how it is all constructed and deconstructed (falls onto the page) is totally piecemealed (for the essayist to decide) and singular. This is the lyrical essay. Philip Lopate asks what the contemporary essay brings "to the table":

> One might cynically say: opacity, incoherence, mediocrity. Or, more hopefully: an attention to the movements and undulations of

> language as a subject in itself; a replacement of the monaural, imperially ego-confident self, the I-character voice, with a more multivalent, realistically unstable, communal or media-channeling speaker system; a wedding of contemporary poetry and nonfiction. (*The Writing Life* 30)

In my mind, it becomes impossible to define a falling-into-pieces (cohesively) genre that in turn attempts to keep up with minute-by-minute pieces of self and worded world – Should we even essay? And how does such inconsistency of personal vision translate into our pedagogies, into something true and solidified for our students? At the end of this chapter, I will examine the positive implications of writing personal essays (no matter how falling they might be) and reveal that finding personal vision in texts lends to finding identity in writing – any writing: essays, cover letters, personal statements, and academic writing. That flotsam which makes up the personal essay eddies but in the end edifies.

E.B. Whitewashes Movement; Sontag Represses; Didion Has a Narrative Nervous Breakdown.

Every semester I begin my composition course with reading (and writing about) E.B White's essay "Once More to the Lake." I start with White because his essay is an example of what Philip Lopate calls a classical or traditional essay, a "nonlyric essay"(*Art of* 30) – one that offers straightforward exposition, clear transitions between paragraphs and ideas, and ends with a conclusion that tidily wraps up the thesis; "thought accrue[s] to some purpose" (*Art of,* Lopate 30). I begin my courses (and this chapter) with White's essay, for it serves as a foil to the more experimental essays that break away from linearity. White's essays share themes of truth-making, then breaking with the biggest rule breakers of them all, but he does so with straightforward narrating. He is

lyrical in his language, but Norman Rockwell-conventional in his style.

"Once More to the Lake" is an essay desperately denying the movement of aging and mortality. White shuns the relentless truth of life's inexorable motion through a lulling text. In the essay, White takes his child to a campsite around a lake the author used to frequent when he was a boy. The middle-aged narrator chooses the lake over the ocean since the sea with "the restlessness of the tides and the fearful cold…the incessant wind" makes the father long for "placidity" and stillness (104). The sea represents too much motion; the lake and its surroundings, however, have not changed since White's childhood, and thus creates a convenient and safe illusion of timelessness, an illusion of immortality and sameness. For a moment, life and self are contained and freeze-framed as if the lake has sacred powers: "This seemed an utterly enchanted sea, this lake you could leave to its own devices for a few hours and come back to, and find that it had not stirred, this constant and trustworthy body of water…over the years there had been this person with the cake of soap, this cultist, and here he was. There had been no years" (106).

"There had been no years" is repeated throughout the essay, as if through the nervous repetition, White can convince himself that indeed "everything is as it always has been, that the years were a mirage" (105). The serenity of his language, and the cohesiveness of his tightly structured essay reinforce the security of his illusion. Prayer-like, with summertime as his joyous apostrophe and apotheosis, he writes, "Summertime, oh summertime pattern of life indelible, the fade-proof lake, the woods unshatterable, the pasture with the sweet fern and juniper forever and ever, summer without an end" (107); White pleas existentially for the indelible.

Whenever one looks at an illusion, there is inevitably a back and forth movement between two images (for example, the famous vase turns to a face illusion); the mind and eye can hold one consistent image still only for so long. We feel this push, pull of present (vase) and past (face), stillness and movement tug-of-warring more and more throughout the essay. At first White begins to notice subtle changes around the lake out of the corner of his eye, and we know his illusion of sameness is in danger. The waitresses have washed their hair; the three-track road is reduced to two ("For a terrible moment I missed the middle alternative") (106); there are now tarred roads, and the local store serves Coca-Cola over Moxie and root beer. Yet White does not linger on these changes for too long and returns to his unbudging memories willfully superimposed onto a present picture, a fade-proof facade that looks exactly the same as it always has. Age and death are for a second more, held. There is that Bemelmans's *Madeline* moment when we can no longer say "pooh pooh" to the tiger in the zoo, that moment those twelve-girls in two straight lines will predictably break into Madeline mayhem, and Miss Clavel, in the middle of the night, has to turn on the light for something is not quite right. E.B. White has this Miss Clavel moment as he begins to sense something is amiss, and he will soon see the light. Just as illusions make us dizzy in the back and forth motion, White too becomes dizzy in the darting motion of a dual state of mind:

> We stared silently at the tips of our rods, at the dragonflies that came and went, I lowered the tip of mine into the water, tentatively, pensively dislodging the fly, which darted two feet away, poised, darted two feet back, and came to rest again a little farther up the rod. There had been no years between the ducking of this dragonfly and the other one – the one

> that was part of memory. I looked at the boy, who was silently watching his fly, and it was my hands that held the rod, my eyes watching. I felt dizzy and didn't know which rod I was at the end of. (106)

The illusion is becoming dislodged – its screws in the mind loosening until the sound of motorboats and finally a thunderstorm unsettle and "set the years moving":

> The only thing that was wrong now, really, was the sound of place, an unfamiliar nervous sound of outboard motors…this was the note that jarred…in those other summertimes all motors were inboard; and when they were at a distance the noise they made was sedative, and ingredient of summer sleep…now the campers all had outboards. In the daytime, in the hot mornings, these motors made a petulant irritable sound. (107)

This sound is the whining reminder of aging's petulance. White expresses that his child has the desire to "to achieve single-handed mastery over the outboard boats and soon he learn[s] the trick of choking the valve" (108). White writes of the old summertime boats:

> Watching him I remembered the things you could do with the old-one cylinder engine with the heavy flywheel, how you could have it eating out of your hand if you got close to it spiritually…there was a way of reversing them, if you learned the trick, by cutting the switch and putting it on again exactly on the final dying revolution of the flywheel, so that it would kick back against compression and begin reversing. (108)

We read the above passage with dramatic irony; perhaps the writer is still in denial, but we know there is no reversing for him, no spiritual trick to switch on and off

just at the dying revolution that will cause backward then anchored movement; there is no choking the valve or truth of death. His illusion is doomed. A thunderstorm in the end crashes through his illusion and in the calm afterwards the author watches his child pull on wet swimming trunks: “As he buckled the swollen belt, suddenly my groin felt the chill of death” (109). Death’s truth can no longer be repressed through lulling denial (“A lull in everything that made life tick” (108). Life and death keep moving inevitably along.

So what, I thought in my freshman year of college when I dispassionately read and wrote about the generic, overly anthologized “Once More to the Lake”: I wear red lipstick when I canoe down a river; I hate nature. Twice more to this lake and I will myself die if I have to read it again. I rolled my reading, writing mascaraed eyes, “Oh please, I get the easy theme. The father finally realizes mortality, duhee, so what and ho hum.” But in my unwrinkled skin then, husbandless, dogless, childless, with Mama and Daddy traveling the world (un-hobbling in their movements), I didn’t know the truth of movement. I couldn’t see past the right-in-front-of-me present tense. But now, I read White’s essay, and I want to stop before I reach the end to keep the innocence going, the sameness of nature undisturbed and the conclusion from reaching me. I have moved, and White’s essay thus moves me. When I was little, I would watch the clock to see if I could catch sight of time’s minuscule motion. I would stare at the clock’s face until my eyes watered and stung, until I could just barely make out the second hand clicking in tiny snaps to the next notch. It was inconceivable to me how something could move so slowly as it nicked minute marks of days, years and lifetimes. This is no longer the case: I conceive it now. I see the hands of a clock as the blades of that fan: they are flying around so fast, I can’t keep up with them. E.B. White’s classical essay no longer makes

me yawn as if watching from a long distance something that has nothing to do with me. The essay's theme has caught up with me as if it played a sneaky slow motion (gotcha, you're it) trick on me. And with the conclusion – a groin-grabbing ending – I am left *mort*ified, dizzied and winded – the butt of that "deathless joke" (109) (we always think we are *less* of death one and all), a joke for which most of us predictably *fall*. *Fallingrockcreaksuck, rockfallingcreaksuck*. Falling. Truth be told. Yes we are.

In E.B. White's portrayal of death, his first-person fragility and humility create an intimacy so that the essay elicits a reader/author commiseration that is comforting. We are in this life together, and not one of us gets out alive, but White is not going to leave us, or our children all by ourselves while we learn to accept this. Whether it is through his "I," or through the eight-legged, egg-sacked Charlotte sure-to-die, White is there with a good bedside manner, our literary hospice-guide, saying I am here, no matter how hard the nut-grabbing impact – I get it all. I agree with Lopate when he writes, "Over the years I have come to feel that what interests me most in the classical essay, including the memoirist personal essay, is the quality of rumination. It is the writer's thought, or consciousness, let us call it which hooks me" (*Art of* 30)

When Charlie, a former English teacher of mine, was facing a diagnosis of liver cancer, he told me he had read everything he could get his hands on that had to do with mortality. I went to see him at Sloan Kettering (He flew up from Virginia for treatment.). We talked about UNC basketball games, about what care he was receiving, and we talked a little (carefully) about books: I was interested in his reader-response (I paraphrase here):

Shakespeare's sonnets and heroic couplets wanting so desperately, heroically to

be immortalized in art depressed him: “I feel I have made nothing that beautiful in my life to be immortalized.” Donne and his scathing humbling of death energized him. Kubler-Ross was unrealistic. *Tuesdays with Maury* was comforting, but too “saintly” for him: “If someone visits me on a Tuesday when I am dying, and I need to be at my Sunday best, I don’t think I could do it.” It was “the old steady” Charlotte who so gracefully accepted her fate and helped Wilbur continue living that really spoke to him. But Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor*, he said, made him feel hopeful, but lied to, even lonely: “Why do I need a dose of straight academic formality when faced with mortality? I prefer Charlotte,” he laughed, “I prefer a being, even if it is in a lovely old spider who redeemed a pink pig to keep on living.” Again I paraphrase what he said, his words mixed with mine (and with my research), but the essence of our conversation is the truth nonetheless.

Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor* created an estranged relationship with Charlie. Although Sontag writes brilliantly and poignantly about sickness, while she theorizes illness to a literary cleanliness, she leaves the first person out in the waiting room. She becomes a sort of literary oncologist in her essay as she attempts to cure the language of cancer from its “punitive metaphors.” The goal of her book is to demystify cancer so we are more comfortable facing it; however, she creates distance with some readers as the first person dies out of her text. Cancer begs for humanity, for empathy and commiseration; it does not need to be left alone under a microscope, objectified rather than subjectified. We get enough objectification in the medical world. Yet Sontag equated “autobiography with a more informal, inexact mode of expression that conflict[ed] with the formal elements of her essays” (Rollyson 155). Ironically for many

readers, including me and Charlie, Sontag's formal prose feels inexact with "no human voice" for us to connect her ideas to (Rollyson 155). In Charlie's mind, whether or not cancer is described with alien or war metaphors doesn't matter if the cancer patient indeed feels alienated by the formal language. Sontag had breast cancer when she wrote *Illness as Metaphor*, and thus her own experience, left unspoken, reinforces a discomfort and awkward silence around the "nightside of life…an onerous citizen" (She herself *metaphors* illness with the punitive.), as if there is something to be ashamed of, talked over, a chemo. elephant in the room. I agree with Rollyson when he states that "perhaps the only way Sontag might have remained true to her sensibility and at the same time satisfied her critics would have been to reveal more of the process by which she came to reject the emotional metaphors used to describe and treat illness" (Rollyson 155). With Sontag's formal scholarship, with her "Western Enlightenment reason and linear, right-brain thinking" (*Art of*, Lopate 31) that distrusts I-made meaning, she creates a repressed text of truth because we know, we only have a piece of the whole story. This tension in her theories is in direct opposition to the purpose of her essay: to expose cancer for what it really is: not some superhuman, alien force but just a disease, a *human* disease like any other. While Sontag's logic is convincing, any metaphor given to cancer does not really matter since words will not prevent the dying; at the same time Sontag reveals the danger of language, she also unwittingly undermines her argument as she reveals language's impotence. Charlie argued, "Call cancer what you will; call it a rose; I am dying from it no matter what. Metaphor or no metaphor, in the end, it is the human touch and only that, that has the power to allay such mind and body chaos."

We both agreed; David Reiff, Sontag's son, with his essay "More Than a Metaphor" reached me and Charlie as much as eight-legged Charlotte did. Reiff voices the repression, and this to us was cathartic; Charlie said something like this: "It made me feel normal and spoken to: I need to hear a scream, the most truthful narrative line of all":

> But then, she [Sontag] too, was surprised when the doctors in Seattle came in to tell her the bone marrow transplant had failed and her leukemia was back. She screamed out, 'But this means I'm going to die!' I will never forget that scream, or think of it without wanting to cry out myself. And yet, even that terrible morning, in a pristine room at the University of Washington Medical Center, with its incongruously beautiful view of Lake Union and Mount Rainier in the background, I remember being surprised by her surprise. I suppose I shouldn't have been. There are those who can reconcile themselves to death and those who can't. Increasingly, I've come to think that it is one of the most important ways the world divides up…'We tell ourselves stories in order to live.' The line is Joan Didion's, and looking back on my mother's life, I've been wondering lately if we don't tell them to ourselves in order to die as well. In retrospect, I realize that death was never something my mother talked about much. But it was the ghost at the banquet of many of her conversations, expressed particularly in her single-minded focus on her own longevity and, as she got older, by her frequent voicing of the hope of living.

Yes, we tell ourselves stories to live and stories to die, but some of us realize many of those stories are brainwashed into us; culture, religion, media, literature,

Hallmark cards can bequeath an insidious instruction guide of how to move through it all. Again Charlie's paraphrase: "Life and death have a mind and body truth of their own; you have no idea how complicated it is, until you eye it all from a zero-filled end. It's as simple and complicated as that. Only a broken text could capture my dying." That's about as far as I got with my teacher, my Charlotte-loving friend. Flashes of talks during visiting hours, until yellow-colored, his liver failed him. I remember I was reading Didion's *White Album* at the time, and I wanted to ask him if he thought that writers, who break the narrative down into searching, have an authentic feel to him as they expose the process of a mind making sense of what seems insurmountable nonsense. How would he respond to an experimental text, to Didion's narrative deconstruction that imitates a culture's atrophy? Forced transition, I know but honestly one that is true. What would Charlie have said? I can only imagine.

"The White Album" is in direct contrast to Sontag's essay. We don't expect a journalist to make use of the "I"; we don't expect fragments of writing that expose meaningless and itemized breakdown. We anticipate the rational objective facts of journalism that are constructed in the predictable and objective format. "Didion does not begin her journalistic pieces with a textbook's summarizing hard lead, organize her material in an inverted pyramid, develop her story from a news peg, or write in a telegraphic news style" (Reinert 123). Didion's broken style attempts to convey a fractured "I" and the problematic nature of capturing the factual world. Factual truth is difficult to achieve if surrounding it is nonsensical chaos; thus, Didion subverts the journalistic genre as she writes a disconnected pastiche of a culture in the 1960's that found itself in a wasteland of identity. Didion reports her own personal experience

embedded in journalism. The subjective *leads* the factual. The private and public, the personal and cultural share a byline. She becomes a central character in her reporting and imposes her own narrative line, since the preexisting ones (the factual leads) are breaking down. Facts mean nothing anymore in a counter-culture that has, in Didion's (then) mind, no unified idea of the movement it is truly countering. So why not try the subjective – a new journalism – when all else seems to fail? Reinert writes: "'The White Album' is Didion's report on certain events that have resisted her understanding. These are the shimmering episodes that would in most of her work become emblems, but here remain images, parts of a story, for which she says she 'can find no plot'" (123).

I do a Didion almost every hour of every day. It's a Woolf-like haunting as I move through life imposing narratives on other people's lives; I haunt beings and finish their stories with my own curious projections in a need for answers, meaning, and finished conclusions. A few weeks ago I heard through my walls, a neighbor moaning. Here are the facts. I knew that he worked on Wall Street; I knew he wore a coat and preppy tie. I knew his mother visited him often. I knew he smiled and said a genuine hello to me and to my children. That's all I knew. He moaned and moaned that night, and then whimpered through wall-muffled sobs. I went to his door and pressed an ear to it, but could not make the sounds of his sobbing cohere into a language that would tell the story. So I created a narrative for him. "Bless his heart," I said to myself listening. His mother has died. That lovely woman who pats my fat dog in the elevator is gone. She died suddenly of a heart attack, her hand grabbing at her chest as she folded in bone-clinching panic of no breath. Or, he just found out he has an occipital lobe tumor – grapefruit sized – lodged in an inoperable place in his brain. Sweet man just lost all of his

fortune on Wall Street, has a tumor, a dead mother and is now thinking of suicide. I must call 911 and save him. I will never know what made that beautiful man cry so hard that night. I sat at his door, softly knocked, but he didn't answer.

Didion in "The White Album" captures our basic need for a story's fruition, for an intro, body and summing up finish, for something rationally written from beginning and then smooth-transitioned all the way home to a tight and formal ending.

> We tell ourselves stories in order to live. The princess is caged in the consulate. The man with the candy will lead the children into the sea. The naked woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor is a victim of accidie, or the naked woman is an exhibitionist, and it would be 'interesting' to know which…We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of the narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience. (11)

Yet in a world that is always falling around us, we can only know so much. Our narrative impositions, thus, are ridiculous even up against hard-core facts. Why not, then, represent truth in broken form and see what we come up with? Something that gets closer – some kind of surreal, but very real fracturing that exposes truth for what it sometimes can be – inconsolably, not answering-the door, unsolvable.

Didion's work, even though hippy-dippy dated, resonates with me now, almost fifty years later. We are the post-9/11 generation involved in two wars about which we

barely know the tip of truth. We are left to surmise, to make sense and coherence out of our own interpretations through a world of top-secrets and lies. We tell ourselves stories in order to live, but more and more the narratives for me do not make sense, and like Didion, I have begun to "doubt the premises of all the stories I [have] ever told myself"(13).

Didion constructs her essay with fifteen "flash cuts." There are no titles, no leads, just numbers to head each section. There are no transitions between cuts, and within the story of the cuts, there is no introduction, no clear purpose for why we are being told the information, no grounding context, and no conclusion. It is up to us, as readers, to impose our own narrative lines as we try to piece together what has been broken down. The essay is chopped up into what reads like a long list. I looked at my to-do list over the last month and thought of Didion. I will include parts of it to make a point:

> Pick up Mack from camp and pay for swimming. Work out; buy some underpants (Target Tuesday) garlic and toothpaste. Xerox. Stamps. Grade papers. Call Mama. Eat some fruit. Shrink. Donor drive. C's birthday 4th. Donor drive. No to drinks tonight. Teach Tuesday. PTA on Saturday. Donor drive. Yes on Saturday (check if T can cover me). Shit forgot the 14th. I owe; will cover on the 16th. Watch CNN–Nick's interview. Laurel's party, 10th. Period 22nd. Lotrimin, Pledge, Gain, Kraft, butter, nail polish remover, Preparation H, mustard, rosemary, seltzer, Diet Coke, ice cream sandwiches. Zoloft. Eliz. the 16th. Vodka, 4 of wine. 4 six of beer. 10 rsvped. Call ABC for coverage. Donor drive. Six hours coverage. PTA….

My list tells a tiny synopsis of a story but without context or logic between each itemized thing to accomplish. It is this illogicality that Didion tries to capture (in a less

minimalist, obvious way), as if she throws the confused confetti of her life's "script" into the air, picks up the pieces haphazardly and includes them anywhere, a to-do, have-done list of life's inoperable randomness that tells a story but overall rings of utter cohesive nonsense:

> …My entire education, everything I had been told or had told myself, insisted that the production was never meant to be improvised: I was supposed to have a script, and had mislaid it. I was supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no meaning beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting room experience. In what would probably be my life, I wanted still to believe in the narrative and in the narrative's intelligibility, but to know that one could change the sense with every cut was to begin to perceive the experience as rather more electrical than ethical. (13)

Didion's rhetorical strategies are jarring; they create a disorienting text so that we, like Didion, become a stranger-reader in a strange land, loitering about in the confusion of her culture. Didion writes that in her neighborhood in California the door was "opened wide to stranger and kin" (19). Thus the strangers come in absurdly uninvited, with no purpose, no logical reason for being there which echoes our (the reader's) intrusion and estrangement:

> Some strangers at the door knocked, and invented a reason to come inside: a call, say, to triple A, about a car not in evidence. Others just opened the door and walked in, and I would come across them in the entrance hall. I

> recall asking one such stranger what he wanted. We looked at each other for what seemed a long time, and then he saw my husband on the stair landing. 'Chicken Delight,' he said finally, but we had ordered no Chicken Delight, nor was he carrying any. (19)

These absurdist snippets of theater throughout the essay, the disparate images with no conclusion reminds me of some of Alex Katz's paintings. In a few of his works, he paints flat figures in social situations – women in bright, preppy happiness, cocktails in hand, smiling, or so it seems at first glance. Upon closer look, there is no eye contact between Katz's subjects who have large but penetrating stares. He creates an estrangement not only between the audience and his work, but also between the figures within his work. This affect creates a tension of aloofness, absurdity, existential anxiety and even subtle suppressed hostility. The uneasiness is left unsolved, an unpainted sword hanging over the image. We will never know the true story because Katz leaves those narratives blank-staring and brightly-clothed untold.

Didion constructs this same tension. No one in the "White Album" is making meaningful contact. Didion includes cuts of interviews in which the questions asked are not directly answered, as if the interviewer and her subject are having two separate conversations. "The weird interlocution seemed to take on a life of its own" (31). Convergence between revolutionary ideas becomes impossible, then, and fizzles to a dud of detonating impotence. Didion writes about interviewing Huey Newton:

> I kept wishing that he would talk about himself, hoping to break through the wall of rhetoric, but he seemed to have been one of those autodidacts for whom all things specific and personal present themselves as mine

> fields to be avoided even at the cost of coherence, for whom safety lies in generalization. The newspaper, the radio men, they tried:
>
> *Q. Tell us something about yourself, Huey, I mean your life before the Panthers*
>
> *A. Before the Black Panther Party my life was very similar to that of most black people in this country.*
>
> *Q. Well, your family, some incidents you remember, the influences that shaped You. – Living in America shaped me.*
>
> *Q. Well, yes, but more specifically. –*
>
> *A. It reminds me of a quote from James Baldwin: 'To be black and conscious in America is to be in a constant state of rage.'* (30)

Didion then interviews Jim Morrison, but she sits for hours waiting for him while the rest of the band members engage in a "jingle jangle" communication, and a young groupie "rubbing Manzarek's shoulders {does] not look at anyone" (24). And when the mythical Morrison does show, he and Didion never acknowledge each other. She includes this Alex Katz–like lack of contact and context:

> The curious aspect of Morrison's arrival was this: no one acknowledged it…the girl did not look at Morrison although he was in her direct line of sight. An hour or so passed and, and still no one had spoken to Morrison. Then Morrison spoke to Manzarek. He spoke almost in a whisper, as if he were wresting the words from behind some disabling aphasia…

> I counted the control knobs on the electric console. There were seventy-six…Morrison sat back down again on the leather couch and leaned back. He lit a match. He studied the flame awhile and then very slowly, very deliberately, lowered it to the fly of his black vinyl pants. Manzarek watched him. The girl who was rubbing Manzareks; shoulders did not look at anyone. There was a sense that no one was going to leave the room ever. It would be some weeks before The Doors finished recording this album. I did not see it through. (25)

The Camus-catatonia sulks throughout the essay, yet at the same time a nervousness and violence skulk around the text threatening to blow the sluggishness of anarchic nothingness apart. The flash cuts move quickly, creating a cinematic affect: the choppy film is rolling, and not one thing, even deadened inanity or cataclysmic severity (Kennedy's assassination, the Manson murders, and senseless killings) can stop it, whatever "it" is. No one is going to leave this room ever – the room, an eye with a storm outside that wreaks only powerlessness (i.e. nothing ethical only something electrical).

Didion includes a packing list of trite preparedness taped inside her closet door, enabling her to move at a moment's notice from one meaningless interview to the next. Each item has an emergency fireman's feel: the journalist's alarm goes off, and one is ready to slip on the gear and slide down the pole to pointlessness:

> It should be clear that this was a list made by someone who prized control, yearned after momentum, someone determined to play her role as if she had the script, heard her cues, knew the narrative. There is on this list one significant omission, one article I needed and never had: a

> watch…in other words I had skirts, jerseys, leotards. Pullover sweater, shoes, stockings, bra, nightgown, robe, slippers, cigarettes, bourbon, shampoo, toothbrush and paste, Basis soap, razor, deodorant, aspirin, prescriptions, Tampax, face cream, powder, baby oil, mohair throw, typewriter, legal pads, pens, files and house key, but I didn't know what time it was. This may be a parable, either of my life as a reporter during this period or of the period itself. (36)

Didion goes on to include a psychiatric evaluation of herself, revealing that even medical texts (with science to corroborate them) have no validity. She experiences "an attack of vertigo and nausea and a feeling she might pass out" (46). She experiences an attack of motion-meaning sickness, even though the motion of meaning began with no movement and ended nowhere. Didion's diagnosis of her mind and body symbolizes her diagnosis of the times:

> At some point during the years I am talking about here, after a series of periodic visual disturbances, three electroencephalograms, two complete sets of skull and neck X-rays, one five-hour glucose tolerance test, two electro-myelograms, a battery of chemical tests and consultations with two ophthalmologists, one internist and three neurologists, I was told that the disorder was not really in my eyes, but in my central nervous system. I might or might not experience symptoms of neural damage all my life. These symptoms, which might or might not appear, might or might not involve my eyes. They might or might not involve my arms or legs, they might or might not be disabling…

> ‘Lead a simple life,’ the neurologist advised. ‘Not that it makes any difference we know about.’ In other words it was another story without a narrative. (46-47)

In the central nervous system of the period, in Didion’s disturbed *“*periodic*”* vision, there is nothing clear in sight to *zero* in on for treatment, even textual treatment. She lived in between the might and the might not, “an exclusionary” visionary’s “diagnosis that meant nothing” (47). A writer, a mother, a wife, an activist, a journalist finally realizes her fractured faith, her belief in the might of meaninglessness – or in the might of naughts. Her collapsed faith lives in the parallel universe of a disintegrating essay form. Her rhetorical strategies reinforce a world in which everywhere the author looks ends in a Didion diddlysquat. Ironically, writing had helped Paul Ferguson (on whom she reported), a murderer (serving a life sentence) who won, first prize in a PEN fiction contest and announced plans “to continue his writing. Writing has helped him, he said, ‘to reflect on experience and see what it all means.’” “But” Didion adds, “writing has not *yet* helped me to see what it means” (48).

Not *yet,* I stress, because I imagine she looks back now on the “White Album,” her dismantled representation of nervous nullity and thinks, Perhaps I just *might* have written the exact inexact text that captured the timeless (watchless) truth of all that truthless nothingness that then was mine – that then, was strangely all too real.

The Anything and Everything of the Lyric

At the beginning of any semester, my grade-scared honors’ students pick apart my syllabus and ask about the project that is due at the end of the semester, “Could you explain further the lyric essay that counts twenty-percent of our final grade?” I tell them I

cannot, for in my mind there is no definition. "Each one of you," I say, "will find out what it means through the course of your writing." They don't like such mantra vagary. Nor do I. Writing, to too many, is an amorphous punishment, and therefore, I am loathe to add more mystery right at any writer's beginning. "Just trust me," I want to say, but I know – tried, tested and true – this is exactly what to say to lose the faith of any student. I say it anyway, and then become the Cassandra of the semester. It is only in hindsight that I will live up to my word, for no one from the get-go will believe me until it is all over. I continue to predict that out of my promised course there will be that Trojan horse: many enemies of one's own writing will spill out of the belly and betray; but this time we will overturn myths and rewrite them; scholarly, lyrically gut them, to a formalized finish that we will be proud of. "Ya'll will get there, even if I can't predict how," I say in my southern accent – I the redneck Cassandra who has lost their faith on the first day.

In this chapter I do not predict (as the cliché goes), I only discover. Anyone who claims to know the truth of the essay is a charlatan-Cassandra of the genre. I am humbled in front of the essay form as a whole, thus am hesitant to belittle it with definitions as it has morphed (*amorphed*) into the future. Still on kneeling knees, without infringing on the essay's privacy, I will offer careful generalities of the essay's movement into the lyric. In *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction,* Brenda Miller writes that "the lyric essay requires an allegiance to intuition…when we write in lyric essay mode, we create not only prose pieces but a portrait of our subconscious selves" (146). The word *lyric* comes from the root *lyre* – an instrument known to accompany a singer or a poet in Ancient Greece. The lyric essay is inherently a performative genre, as the lyric becomes an instrument accompanying the self, the subconscious, the writer with the

polyphonic poetic potential of language and form. Anything goes, and there is no norming to be tolerated; the lyric is to each his/her own. Wikipedia (which always invites an edit) says:

> The 'Lyric Essay' is *quite simply* a title for an odd range of hybrids. If it's not entirely a poem, fiction, non-fiction, or an essay, but straddles those categories, it is most likely a lyric essay. This is just a very rudimentary description of what a lyric essay entails, however. Aesthetically there is usually some sort of rhythm or logic to the language. The diction is often as carefully chosen as with a poem. Its paragraphs are organized like an essay's, with a topic sentences, and its whole is organized like a piece of fiction or non-fiction – leaping around is common if not encouraged between paragraphs and no underlying structure is necessary. Lastly, the lyric essay is different, it should not conform completely to any standards, it is an individual and fiercely so.

On this Wiki site there is an "Improve Button" to click on if we have more thorough information. I would argue and add to Wiki's definition: the lyric essay is "quite simply" nothing quite simple to simplify. It lives between the might and might not. That it breaks down and leaps around, it might or it might not. It may keep the narrative line with figurative language embellishing or inhibiting each thought. Maybe, maybe not. That there is use of rhyme, repetition, refrain, rant, lists, pictures, we do or do not know this. The lyric essay is prose with poetry, drama with a little fiction, facts pastiched with objective and subjective, or just pure objective within an arrangement that screams I am, or I am naught. But not necessarily. Who knows what it will do – go figure. It may be

flat, impersonal, not completely accessible; cogently incohesive, or accessibly unforgettable – it might or might not be. Strict structures disassembling to then build back up again to an in-cross, outcross of thought, bastarded, muled to a mongrel; blended, braided, and crisscrossed, crossbred and half-bred to a thoroughbred. Maybe so, maybe not. Media, radio, televison, a subconscious thought miscegenated with the purely formalized that comes as it pleases, tuxedoed or shirt-stained, mingling at the mixers, no holds barred…who knows. Anything and everything goes with this genre's invitation – a life of its own as it may or may not succumb to any control. That, in a crackable nutshell, is the lyric essay answer (subject to change within the next second).

Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* reveals these crackable nutshell possibilities. I think of her book as the post 9/11 "White Album." Like Didion, she offers "flash pictures in variable sequence…a cutting room experience" (Didion 13). Yet Rankine's essay reads like a long poem; each flash cuts a stanza with an extended metaphor throughout – one of helpless, disconnected loneliness. It is as if Rankine provides us with a 9/11 aftermath of Yeat's poem "The Second Coming":

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned; (3-6)

The question at the end of the poem ("The rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born?") is answered. The beast for Rankine has indeed been born into a bedlam of a Bethlehem, into a vast, but busy, media-blitzed New York City underworld. The journey through this text leads us River-Styxian into death flowing into more death.

Death of children, parents; death of a generation, death by association, death of a lifestyle; death of effectiveness, death by loneliness, death by just talking to anyone. The essay is elegiac, mourning the possibility of resuscitation and connection, of a time when Rankine could say, "No one I knew well had died" (5). On one page Rankine includes the graphic "DNR" (9); we have flat-lined past the point of CPR or defibrillation. The book is tall (eight inches in height), yet the text on each page is single-spaced in a small font and crammed towards the top, leaving the remainder blank. It is as if it is too painful to fill the blank spaces with poetry and prose any further. Language can only go so far when it means so little and causes so much disconnection. Over and over again, the text itself dies and leaves us in a white void to make room for our own emptiness. The emptiness itself becomes text.

Scattered throughout the essay are visuals: photographs, graphics, x-rays, prescriptions, warning labels, diagrams (often with no context given). Televisions with static on the screens are consistent images throughout (sometimes taking up a whole page to themselves), a kind of poetic machine-refrain that can't be turned off. For Rankine, the mind-controlling media have defined, written the self into another reality, one in which we have relations with televisions, movies, machines rather than with live human beings. Rankine describes a man, Mr. Tools: he was "for awhile the only person in the world walking around with an artificial heart, said the weirdest thing was being without a heartbeat…he had a whirr instead. It was not the same whirr of a siren, but rather the fast repetitive whirr of a machine whose insistent motion might eventually seem like silence" (71). It is the machine then that eventually becomes every man's heart, the machine that tells us robotically we are alive. This is lonely. The essay asks for the definition of

loneliness:

> Define loneliness?
>
> Yes.
>
> It's what we can't do for each other.
>
> What do you mean for each other?
>
> What does life mean? (62)

The title of the book on the cover page is splayed in bold letters across a giant billboard. *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is a desperate command, an advertisement of the soul, a plea that addresses us and gives us the responsibility to save the author in a world where antidepressants don't work ("Taking a pill every day for depression is depressing" (53).); where we find out truth off the internet; (I think surely some percentage of women haven't been raped, I don't know though, really. Perhaps this is the kind of thing I could find out on Google" (72)); where renowned psychiatrists can't save themselves; where cancer is setting in on so many bodies; where it is senseless to call 1-800-Suicide if you think you may already be dead; where terrorists strike us, and anthrax comes in the mail; where no one really knows where *here* is because we are already too far gone from *here* to find a *there*. Definitions, directions, connections have lost their truth.

The liver is another reoccurring theme. Rankine's editor asks her to define the liver. "Why do I care about the liver? I could have told her it is because the word *live* hides within it. Or we might have been able to do something with the fact that the liver is the largest single internal organ next to the soul, which looms large though hidden" (54). Rankine provides a diagram of the body and draws a line to identify the exact place of the lost liver. You are here, she emphasizes, for we need the rudimentary instructions; we are

tranquilized tourists groping about in body benightedness, not knowing the largest organ that rids us of our blood's and soul's impurities. James Hillman writes:

> The liver has always been an important symbol in occult physiology. As the largest organ, the one containing the most blood, it was regarded as the darkest, least penetrable part of man's innards. Thus it was considered to contain the secret of fate and was used for fortunetelling. In Plato, and in later physiology, the liver represented the darkest passions, particularly the bloody, smoky ones of wrath, jealousy, and greed which drive men to action. Thus the liver meant the impulsive attachment to life itself. (16)

We have lost the ability to penetrate the guts that contain our passions; we have lost our call to action, our attachment to life itself. Rankine diagrams for us (more than once) where the liver is to remind us to locate it, take care of it by not taking certain drugs which will damage it and our fate. The drugs symbolize all that we have ingested in this fallen underworld that give our souls a sort of sickly yellow cirrhotic loneliness – all that teaches our soul's heart-beating truths how to flat line and then quit breathing.

> Or well, I tried to fit language into the shape of uselessfulness. The world moves through words as if the bodies the words reflect did not exist. The world like a giant liver, receives everyone and everything, including these words: Is he dead? Is she dead? The words remain an inscription on the surface of my loneliness. My loneliness stems from a feeling of uselessness. Then Coetzee's Costello says in her fictional lecture, 'for instants at a time I know what it is like to be a corpse.' (129).

In the essay, Rankine repeats: "Your life is waiting." Across a picture of a

television screen the phrase (no longer the static) appears: “It remains on the screen long enough so that when I close my eyes to check if I am sleeping, instead of darkness, yourlifeiswaiting stares back at me” (29). Rankine is waiting for reconnection, human contact, for presence, and for the giant liver to receive everyone and everything: thus it would resume its healthy function of supplying the mind and the body with oxygen-rich blood; so that we are brought back from our near-death experience, and from the underworld, Persephone-like, we could run from down there, up to here again and breathe the clean air. Perhaps through our reading of this text, Rankine’s words will no longer be useless in that they just might communicate a very alive truth to us:

> The handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that – Here. I am here. This conflation of the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive. (130)

Will we extend a hand back to her in a real reader/writer meaningful relationship –one that blips on the EKG a heartbeat? Who knows, but Rankine is trying anything and everything as she is searching, advertising, televising, diagramming, lyrically writing and waiting for a self’s soul’s honest and human answer. Will we reply? I did reply a truthful yes to Rankine, but still with my answer, I felt lonely. Is that the truth of the way we are now? Maybe.

Lyrically Unreliable

Unreliable narrators ironically often produce an effect in me that makes me trust them all the more, for if they overtly or even through rhetorical strategies confess that they are unreliable, there is reliability in just that. Albert Goldbarth by blurring the

boundaries, by mixing poetry, myth, fiction, nonfiction in his essays and with his "I" driving the whole concoction exposes the impossibility of conclusions of definitions of self and its life story. Goldbarth plays with truth, memory, the past and identity in his book aptly titled *Many Circles* (perhaps a nod to Emerson):

> The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere. We are all our lifetime reading the copious sense of this first of forms. One moral we have already deduced, in considering the circular or compensatory character of every human action. Another analogy we shall now trace; that every action admits of being outdone. Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens. ("Circles"404)

There is no end to rings after rings of changing truth, and we are a constant work in progress, revising the past, which leads to revising the future. Round and round we go chasing tales. Goldbarth begins his collection with the essay "After Yitzl" which is his overall poetic message about relationship between self, memory, and truth. About Goldbarth's work, Barbara Miller writes:

> Goldbarth braids several different strands together to create a highly textured essay. Written in numbered sections that at first seem to have

> little to do with one another, the essay works through a steady accretion of imagery and key repetitions; it speaks in a voice that grows loud, then whispers, that cuts itself off, then rambles. The strands include among other things, a sleepy conversation in bed with a lover, a fabricated 'previous life'…The sleepy conversation provides the overall 'container' for the essay, an architecture that holds the fragments in place.
>
> The essay turns out to be about how we fabricate our own pasts, constantly and continually; how memory itself is a myth; how we create ourselves anew in the stories we tell. (*Tell It Slant* 153)

Goldbarth's epithet for the essay reads, "It is not for nothing that a Soviet historian once remarked that the most difficult of a historian's tasks is to predict the past (Bernard Lewis, *History*). In "After Yitzl" Goldbarth predicts ("since all documents have been destroyed") a history of his identity in "an earlier life (1)." The story "begins in bed, in one of those sleepy troughs between the crests of sex…the night is gray and permissive (1). The permissive narrative reads like a dreamy creation myth; we are permitted to enter into the flow as the narrator bedtime-stories his lover with a war-torn romance that is told and reads as real. There are no dates or origins that would ground us in historical context. It could be any Jewish ancestry, any Jewish *ancestory.* We are only told of a union between the real narrator playing the part of a fictive one in a made-up past and of his marriage to a woman named Mishele in "the story-*in*- [his} story" (2); out of chaos (war) the fictive narrator becomes a farmer on a shtetl compound. The fictive narrator's best friend, Yitzl, is in love with a "snapplehouse sweetie." When Yitzl dies, the fictive narrator takes his place and marries Mishele, and it is here that an emergency

genealogy is formed. In creating a fictional past life that winds in and out of the author's nonfictional life, Goldbarth disorients the reader. Since it is the past that "orders the present" (4), we are out of order as we attempt to trace this author's life into the nonfiction of his external narrative. His present is defined by historical make-believe: "To pattern the present, we'll fabricate the past from before there *was* fabric…just open the mind and the past it requires will surface" (4). "Where we come from. How we need to know, If necessary we will steal it" (2). Textual identity is for Goldbarth creative – a poetic invention. Memory identity floats disconnected in darkness of the past with a life of its own. Goldbarth writes: "Earlier I said, 'in the trough between crests – sea imagery. I mean in part that the dark, as it grows deeper, takes the world away, and a sleepless body will float all night in horrible separation from what it knows and where it is nurtured. Freedom is sweet; but no one wants to be flotsam"(5). In order not to be flotsam, we anchor ourselves with concrete stories of who we are. We marry ourselves backwards, and as we do so, we randomly resurrect another identity:

> The Mormons marry backward. 'Sealing' they call it. In the sanctum of the temple, with permission called a 'temple recommend,' a Mormon of pious state may bind somebody long dead (perhaps an ancestor of his own, perhaps a name provided by chance from a list of cleared names in the computer – bind that person to the Mormon faith, and to the flow of Mormon generations, in a retroactive conversion good for time and eternity…(4)

We land for a bit into the present tense of the I (the nonfiction narrator), and the you (the nonfiction lover/listener). We never know the lives or even the names of the

disembodied "I" and "you"; it is not necessary to know them since the "I" and "you" will redo, in one backward glance, the self:

> The story is over, too: The 'I' is done talking, the 'you' is nearly asleep, they lazily doodle each other's skin. We met them, it seems a long while ago, in what I called a 'trough between the crests." Let their bed be a raft…
>
> But nothing is ever over – or, if it is, then the impulse is wanting to make it over: 'over' not as in 'done,' but in 'again.' 'Redo.' Re-synapse. Re–nova. (15)

Goldbarth concludes his essay with the story of a maid named Rosalita who is from the hills in Mexico "that doesn't even bear a name, so she hasn't any papers at all – absolutely no identification." She needs surgery and thus papers. She bribes an agent at The Records Division and leaves with somebody else's birth certificate, working papers etc. "She had somebody else's life from the beginning, and she could go on with her own" (15). Identity, memory, ancestry, *ancestory*, love are all one constantly-creating creation myth. We circle forwards, backwards, and there is no end to any story since we keep recreating ourselves along lines that never know how to finish. We are reliably unreliable in a world where the reality of identity loses itself in re-nova.

David Shields in his essay "Life Story" hilariously toys with the idea that there is no original authentic life story. We are so defined by a barrage of texts that our life stories are already written for us. Our lives in text then are plagiarized versions of one another. There is no escaping texts and how they condition our identities consciously and unconsciously. In his essay Shields constructs a two-page memoir with bumper stickers,

many of which are written in the first person. Shields's essay speeds as aphorism after aphorism drive towards or by us, as if we are not, this time, Woolf's street-walking flaneurs, but instead highway flaneurs bombarded with snippets of other people's lives that then come together in flying fragments to become our story as well, whether we know it or not. Text is sneaky as it traffics our minds with its identity. Text takes over and rewrites us into its own version. There is no such thing as the real; Shields writes, "*Reality* as Nabokov never got tired of reminding is the one word that is meaningless without quotation marks" (*Reality Hunger* 4).

The "narrator" in "Life Story" is a fabrication, a construction of culture and media. The "narrator" in places is a stock misogynist, that truck driver we women know so well who passes by our car windows and blows his horny horn. "Girls wanted, all positions, will train…no ugly fat chicks. No fat chicks…Not all men are fools; some are single…Down on your knees bitch. Sex is only dirty when you do it right…liquor up front – poker in the rear." The "narrator" is then a woman ("Sexy blond on board."); an expectant mother, a tough father, ("my kid beat up your honor student."); a grandfather; a gun-loving hunter ("Gun control is being able to hit your target."); a dog lover, a breaker for unicorn. There is no "narrator," for he has been written to death. The last bumper sticker says, "Choose death" (339-341).

The lyric essay is a means to express and perhaps overcome the armageddon of reality in that its very structure and rhetorical strategies have the potential to convey that reality in text is in crisis. That, in itself, is a reality. The lyric essay has the power to produce any reality it desires. Reality after reality after reality until reality loses itself in the anarchy:

> The lyric essay doesn't expound, is suggestive rather than exhaustive, depends on gaps, may merely mention. It might move by association, leaping from one path of thought to another by way of imagery or connotation, advancing by juxtaposition or sidewinding poetic logic. It often accretes by fragments, taking shape mosaically. Its import visible only when one stands back and see it whole…It gives primacy to artfulness over conveying the information, forsaking narrative line, discursiveness, and the art of persuasion in favor of idiosyncratic mediation. It may meander, making use of other genres when they serve its purpose, sampling the techniques of fiction drama journalism song film the story it tells may be more than metaphors. Or, storyless, it may spiral in on itself…while it's ruminative, it leaves pieces of experience undigested and tacit inviting the reader's participatory interpretation. Perhaps we're drawn to the lyric essay now because it seems less possible and more rewarding to approach the world through the front door, through the myth of objectivity. Similitude often seems more revealing than verisimilitude. We turn to the writer to reconcoct meaning from the bombardment of experience…(D'Agato and Deborah Tall, qtd in Sheilds,130-131)

In *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, Shields posits that we are hungering for the real. But how can we find it if it exists in a blurring (to the point of invisibility)? (5). There is no clear distinction anymore between art and life, "fact and fiction: the lure and the blur of the real" (5). Or is there?

The Personal Pedagogy

If my pedagogy for my composition courses could make noise, it would be the cliché sound of a construction site as we form reliable structures that will pass academic inspection. Yet at the same time there would be the noise of demolition, toppling, splintering, buildings dynamited as we raze structures and rebuild a bricolage of the self. We build and we break side by side until the I, like a boulder, holds any text.

I ask my students to write if they love, hate, like writing. Here are some of the responses: "I hate writing in college because it has to be formal instead of flowery and it has to be stiff and unnatural." "I like writing for myself." "Writing for a course is a dictatorship. You just go through the *1984* motions. There is nothing real in it." "I love writing my own way and you can't do that in the real world." I also ask my students how many have been taught never to use the first person singular in scholarship. Usually all hands go up! They have had the wind knocked out of them by a pedagogical punch to the gut of the soul. They need a hit of the I from that subjective machine gun rat-a-tatting I-I-I-I. Self makes the work, not *1984* totalitarianism.

Every class we write for ten minutes. We then read aloud unless a student feels in the mood to pass. Many pass at the beginning of the semester. Their shoulders are held tight in tension; their faces are red. In the first weeks, the writing reads mostly like this: "I am tired. School sucks, and I just want to eat and sleep." With prompts throughout the semester the writing becomes a performance art. The red-faced shyest want to read and look up when they finish with confident eyes that say, "I know you just heard that. There is no way you didn't." The extroverts get louder and louder to the point where the class applauds. Eventually most students find an audience and love their own words so much

that performance anxiety loosens as we get lost in the moment of sheer improvisational writing. Anything goes with the prompts that students create:

I want. I hate. I wish. Don't! Go. Damnit. I didn't. If! Oh. Yes. Maybe. No. I used to. I could. I could have. I do. I did. But. Jesus! I don't know. I believe. My race is. Secret. There. I need. Street walking. Oh God! Do I? I love. Ok. Period. I am. I am not. Please. Listen. I might. Bullshit.

After we have written, we break the work down to ten fragments, then to ten words to capture the essence of the piece. The fragments read like a poem. We then go back into the text and insert the fragments and words all the way through as refrains. The result is ninety percent of the time a work of passionate, shy, or extroverted, experimental exploration of self in a tiny work of art.

At the end of the semester students create a pastiche of their entries under one umbrella theme. They are required to read them aloud, and we hear the echo of the semester and their development boomerang…Students rant; they have refrains of their favorite lines. The text meanders, breaks the narrative line, but in places keeps it. The writing jumps and leaps from one image to the next; self swirls and crescendos, finds itself in gaps, fragments, ellipsis, secrets, loudness, anger, love, conviction, experience, poetry, metaphor, and shifting, flying commotion. Through the semester the "I" transfers confidently and organically into formal scholarship: *"I know you just heard that. There is no way you didn't."* From the unseasoned writer in the class to the seasoned, the lyric essays are the most potent pieces of anything I have ever experienced in all my years of teaching. They are powerful because they are purely true to the writer, and it is this truth of self that causes the writer to step into the limitless limelight of his/her own words. We

make; we break. We offer that Rankine handshake. *The handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that – here. I am here. This conflation of the solidarity of presence with the offering of this same presence perhaps has everything to do with being alive. Or the meaning of here is in this world, in this life on earth. In this place or position, indicating the presence of or in other words, I am here.* (My emphasis, Rankine 130-131)

You writer are here! – an I-I-I-I you, falling in beautiful "chunks of reality" (Shields 4), in tight or loose idiosyncratic structures – playfully, honestly all over the page. Chapter Three ends with the echo of your lyricism and with your firm word of presence. "Your life is waiting." Your liver is healthy.

Having read their eyes, and to hear their alive "I's," it has made me feel less lonely.

Chapter Four: Creative Memory

Mama, What Does Memory Mean?

My six year old asked me the other day, "Mama, what is memory?" We were on the subway and people around us smiled at my little boy's question. They also were waiting, I sensed, for my answer. It was a hard question for me. Recently my family has undergone a crisis. Layers of lying from my childhood to now have been exposed so that everything that formed my identity, my sense of family, my faith in marriage, church; my morals and principles has been shaken. My memories of growing up are based on a false foundation. In eight months, in a panicked rush hour, I have had to rewrite my past and now do not know how to remember it. "Mama, please define memory," my child kept whining, "it is my homework assignment." *My father has fallen.* "My teacher says memory is non-fiction." *Seersucker suited doctor with southern gentleman bedside manner; my mother a Latin scholar…forty-eight years*. "Mama," my child whined.*…the most enviable southern family" Father. Daughter.* "Mama, What is the answer to memory? I need it for my homework?" *Lear…fallen father; fallen memories.*

My little boy kept repeating that question to me and to my tacit in-transit audience. With unadulterated irritability, I wanted to shout, "Memory is a big joke, ok? There's your answer. Memory is one enormous trick on the mind of a self, projecting backwards, a cuckoo-clock-gymnast bird sticking its heads out of clocks, cuckooing and warping time. Memory is a willful desire of controlling the past with our minds, fragments, flashes, where the past joins the present, only for the present to reform the past with its now point of view. Memory is personal. Memory is daily annihilation. Memory is, my love, in transit." Of course, I did not say these things to my little boy; I simply answered to him with an exhausted, "I do not know what memory is. Let's use our

imaginations and try come up with something." Lord Byron writes, "It is singular how soon we lose the impression of what ceases to be constantly before us. A year impairs, a luster obliterates. There is little distinct left without an effort of memory, then indeed the lights are rekindled for a moment – but who can be sure that the imagination is not the torch-bearer?" (qtd. in Moore 261).

It is all too appropriate that according to the Greeks, Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, is the mother of the nine muses, all of whom inspire literature, poetry and oral storytelling throughout the centuries. Memory births musing, imagination, creativity, construction through art. Memory in text needs not a foreward to its story but instead a "forewarning" (Ozick ix): We are temporary truth. Turn one's written page after a few too many yesterdays, and memory changes. The torchbearer's light that reveals memory in language might be *arti*ficial at times, "for imagination and memory are Siamese twins, and you cannot cut them so cleanly apart. There's a good case for arguing that any narrative account is a form of fiction. The moment you start to arrange the world in words, you alter its nature (Raban, qtd in Shields 65). John Kihlstrom writes in his article "Memory, Autobiography, History":

> Memory is not a thing, labeled by a noun, but rather an activity, labeled by a verb. Memories are things people have, but remembering is something people do…memory is not like a book that we read, but rather it's like a book that we write anew each time we remember. One's memory may be based on fragmentary notes supplied by the memory trace. The memory trace supports remembering, but it's not all there is to memory" (4).

Kihlstrom explains the "Reconstruction Principle." Memory reconstructs itself

through time as it gathers knowledge from “other sources”; thus, memory looks back and infers as it reads the past. “Remembering is more like making up a story than it is like reading one printed in a book” (4). Since memory can be crusty-eyed, biased by the subjective, narrowed by one point of view, an exact transcription in text is complicated. Memory in text is a translation of the past that captures traces of the reality of the actual true-tongued memory as it really happened back there in the dimly-lit distance. How exact the translation is, into whatever future it enters, no one knows. Patricia Hampl writes in her memoir, *I Could Tell You Stories*, that she is guilty of a “number of lies.” “My desire was to be accurate. I wished to embody the myth of memoir: to write as an act of dutiful transcription. Yet clearly the work of writing a personal narrative caused me to do something very different from transcription. I am forced to admit that memory is not a warehouse of finished stories, not a gallery of framed pictures. I must admit that I invented” (22).

I write this chapter furious at memory. Mnemosene, the mother of memory, I send the girly snake-haired Furies to judge you. You have seduced me, cliché yellowed me, jaded me, tricked me, baffled me; thus, I invoke you…Sing mother muse of memory. Guide this epic of a chapter and help me understand how you work, how to put my faith in you. Are you true? "Speak, Memory/ Of the cunning hero, / The wanderer, blown off course time and again/ After he plundered Troy's sacred heights" (Homer, Book I, 1-3). I have been plundered off course and am trying to find my way in your wiliness. “Speak, Immortal One/And tell the tale once more in our time (14-15).

Did this happen?

Yes.

Did this happen in this way?

The answer to that, if you're grown up, is 'Not necessarily.' (Tony Kushner qtd in Adam Liptake, qtd. in Shields 60)

Infirm Truth of Memoir

> Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
> Success in Circuit lies
> Too bright for our infirm Delight
> The Truth's superb surprise
> As Lightening to the Children eased
> With explanation kind
> The Truth must dazzle gradually
> Or every man be blind – (Dickinson 870)

When I taught Dickinson, I used to tell my students to poke a hole through a piece of paper and look through it into the world. This produces the experience of reading Emily Dickinson's poems. Though they may be tiny, they telescope into a wideness of gradual but dazzling truth. Truth is not what you think you minutely see at first.

Tell It Slant, the title of Brenda Miller's anthology of/on creative nonfiction, is a forgiving command to nonfiction writers: Write truth the only way it can honestly be written, in circuit. Whole truths have holes. That's a fact. Hampl writes, "The memoir is a version – one small individual version among a million – a version of changing wholeness" (302). Robert Winder writes in "Editorial":

> How can we enjoy memoirs? Believing them to be true, when nothing, as everyone knows, is so unreliable as memory? Many memoirs make a virtue of seeming unadorned, unvarnished, but the first and most forgettable thing we learn about memory is that it is fallible. Memories, we know, can be buried, lost blocked, repressed, even recovered. We

> remember what suits us, and there's almost no limit to what we can forget. Only those who keep faithful diaries will know what they were doing at this time, on this day, a year ago. The rest of us recall only the most intense moments, and even these tend to have been mythologized by repetition into well-wrought chapters in the story of our lives. To this extent, memoirs really can claim to be modern novels, all the way down to the presence of an unreliable narrator (Winder, qtd in Shields 26-27)

This chapter confronts the issues that readers and writers face with memoir and with putting our faith into a genre reconstructed from traces of past knowledge, slanted by the one-sided subjective, or re-created, re-imagined (translated) into a literary art form. I will concentrate on select memoirs as a means of raising these issues. I will also explore the process I underwent in coming to terms with the genre. I will first examine Lauren Slater's memoir *Lying*. With her work, Slater exposes the elusive nature of diagnosing not only the nature of illness, but also the very nature of memoir. Her title, before we open her book, reveals a tricky truth: My memoir will not be honest. Picasso writes, "Art is not truth; art is a lie that enables us to recognize truth" (qtd. in Shields 32).

I will then examine Mark Doty's *Heaven's Coast* and explore the problems with trusting memoirs written in the throes of grief or anger. Mark Doty's *Heaven's Coast* is a memoir in mourning. Doty's lover, who died of AIDS, becomes a saint and martyr in the author's prose. When memoir turns into teary eulogy, and when readers are sentimentally satiated with such an angelic version of death, can reader or writer be trusted to discern the truth? Are we deafened by the love of beautiful language ringing in our ears? In harsh contrast, Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother,* which recounts her brother's demise through

AIDS, lacks any sentimentality. But can we forgive her unforgiving, unsparing memory? While Kincaid's metaphors and her treatment of family are brutal enough to anger readers into rejecting the author's bitter truths, other readers trust Kincaid; there are no violins serenading her language, no angels *alleluiaing* through her metaphors to glorify death, disease and familial relationships. Kincaid chastises those who re-make, re-write themselves in art "as if they just fell from the sky whole"(44), so that we are left wondering if memory is too often palimpsestic, our painful parchments only traces of truth as we attempt to write over them.

I will end the chapter examining Holocaust memoirs. Extreme trauma adds even more pressure to achieve exact actuality in that the memoirist has the responsibility, not only of transcribing the first person's story, but also of documenting an historical truth. The last section of this chapter will examine two memoirs of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel's *Night,* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Truth's stakes are higher when the skinny "I" bears the full weight of the "we" as writing bears witness for millions. I write, therefore I am, evolves into I write, therefore *we* are. "How does the memoirist realistically represent the space of death behind the barbed-wire curtain?" (*Extremities,* Miller 22). How can ordinary language convey the subhuman without humanizing it? What gets lost in the translation of trauma since the "I" as witness, a singular body, cannot totally em*body* the void?

Tortuous texts share "the impossible task of narrating the extreme and of making coherent what defies coherence" (*Extremities* Miller 70), and readers share the impossible task of trying to comprehend truth from the comfort of a couch under a soft reading lamp. There is a disjoint then, not only between text and reader, but also between the writer and

his/her words. Paul Celan writes that in order to civilize language after the Holocaust, "words passed through a thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech" before a sun could be the sun again (qtd. in Young 31). The signifier is singed from the signified, creating a diabolical disjunction; sentences then should shred to silence voicing the smoke and echoing the void.

What happens to traumatic truth when creativity, metaphor, symbol, and beautiful language convey the horror – when aesthetics clash with atrocity? Rosenfeld writes, "There are no metaphors for Auschwitz just as Auschwitz is not a metaphor for anything else. The flames were real flames, the ashes only ashes, the smoke always only smoke, the burnings can only be or mean what they in fact were: the death of the Jews" (qtd. in Young15). I will examine how the memoirist, the "survivor –scribe," bears the unbearable task of writing/re-writing the Holocaust without unwriting the full weight of its terrible truths. "The Talmud tells of how the brilliant scribe Rabbi Meir was told by his master, Rabbi Ishmael: 'Be careful. Should you omit or add on single word you may destroy the world'" (qtd. in Young 21). This is too sacredly severe indeed, but it reveals the memoirists' Lazarus-like responsibility to in*scribe* those unmarked tombstones with an accurate account that will give to the dead a literary survival and memory.

Memoir has many faces; those faces are linear, historical, scholarly, fragmented, poetic, lyrical, pastiched, comic-stripped etc. Memoir multi-tasks (multi-masks) and is difficult to define. James Atlas writes in *The New York Times Magazine*:

> Contemporary memoir comes in many forms; it's as various as the stories its practitioners relate. From edgy post-modern memoirs like 'Sex Death Enlightenment: A True Story,' by Mark Matousek, a harrowing account of

> his philandering mother, deadbeat dad and suicidal sister, to 'Being Brett,' Douglas Hobbie's devastating journal of his daughter's death, written in the third person (as if no I could bear it), the genre eludes precise literary definition. Some memoirs are written as history, replete with documents and genealogies; others are terse, impressionistic catalogues of moments in a life. What memoirists have discovered is that they can bring to their own stories the narrative sweep of fiction or biography. Fiction demands that the writer invent; memoir exploits as material the gift of lived experience.

The memoir genre gambit reveals (like the personal essay) that when authors attempt to capture self in story, the rhetorical possibilities become endless. The production of memoir too has become endless. This is the age of confession. This is the age of subjective factuality/reality. Yet the memoirist is not in a private and dark booth confessing and whispering, "Father I am an alcoholic, an over-eater, a victim of incest, rape, war, genocide; I am not a manic depressive, a junkie, a transsexual, a sad housewife on Oxycontin; an artist revealing a craft; or a lit. crit. who believes his/her life behind the criticism should be divulged." The intimate disclosure of a memoirist, that feels and reads so privately, is indeed mass-marketed to the public. The memoirist has a million unknown confidantes, priests, best friends to whom he tells/sells all the secrets; thus, there is an absurd tension that is inherent in the genre. A false sense of intimacy is created, for the secrecy of self whispers rampantly in Barnes and Noble until the private and the interior become public and exterior all at the same time. There is an epidemic of the exposing "I." Memoir "is a democratic genre… The old and the young…; the famous

and the obscure; the crazy and the sane; the contemporary memoir is like the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma in Kafka's fable 'Amerika,' where everyone can be an artist. Everyone can be an autobiographer" (Atlas).

We live in the Oprah Winfrey, Dr. Phil age of public confession as a form of healing and understanding self, an age of self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous where the self's story, an oral account is excavated from the memory and placed in the spotlight of the present tense for others to commiserate, empathize, sympathize with (or learn from the lessons of) the narrative. The story then becomes a collective one and creates a sense of community, freeing us from repression and alienation. The novel cannot achieve this sense of community quite as powerfully as the memoir. Even though we may still empathize, sympathize with and learn from the narrator or characters in a novel, at the end of the day, at the end of the page, a voice in our heads reminds us, "But this is not real." These days we cannot escape the real. Reality TV is taking over. Cell phones with built-in video cameras can capture Nada, a woman dying in the streets of Iran to then be witnessed by the world within hours on YouTube. The horror of September 11th was captured cubistically in that every angle of the destruction was recorded, written, heard or told. We have become increasingly conditioned to nonfiction. Fiction is losing its hold on our prurient attention spans. We are titillated by and rubber necking for the real. John Kihlstrom writes:

> One of the interesting features of contemporary literature is the gradual displacement of the novel by the memoir. As the critic James Atlas wrote in the *New York Times Magazine*, 'the triumph of memoir is now an established fact.' Instead of reading fiction about ordinary people (the

> technical definition of a novel, as opposed to myth or legend), we now read *non*fiction about ordinary people. Interestingly, the novel itself emerged from earlier literary forms, which look a lot like autobiographies and histories. In English, for example, there are 'memoir novels' like Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722), 'epistolary novels' like Richardson's *Pamela* (1741), and 'histories,' like Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749). By the 19th century, the familiar form of the modern novel had been established: an omniscient third-person narrative of ordinary people engaged in the ordinary course of everyday living. Now, it seems that we've come almost full circle: the memoir has displaced the novel as the literary genre of our age. We've returned to a first-person narrative of ordinary people in everyday life, but also with a kind of omniscience in which authors view earlier experiences in the light of later ones.

Nancy K. Miller writes in *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives* that "memoir is the record of an experience in search of a community, of a collective framework in which to protect the fragility of singularity in a postmodern world" (2). Miller believes that memoir is a "rendez-vous with others"(2), and that what marries the reader to the writer is the desire for us readers to identify ourselves in the pages. This identification with the author creates "interactive remembering" (7). I would add to this idea the notion that the distance between author and reader narrows, and the reading experience (reading as a text in the mind) mirrors the writing process as author and reader join together in an inter-medium intercourse, an intimate identification as

selves blur across the reader/writer gap. Memoir is a way of "crossing boundaries" (7). Even if we, the reader, do not identify with the memoir (we do not find a connection to the drug addict, the victim of incest, the woman warrior etc…), we can find identification through dis-identification: to say "that is definitely not me," is a way of identifying what actually is me. Miller claims:

> Paradoxically, identification can also mean the desire to rediscover yourself across the body or under the skin of *other* selves, people who are nothing – seem nothing – like yourself, to time travel, to get away, to take a much needed vacation from . . . you (whoever that is). Finding losing, losing finding. Who's who? But whatever the modality, the experience passes through acts of memory – the author's and yours, and through the passage between the two. In the back and forth between what's on the page and in your head, your 'you' becomes text. (12)

Miller discounts other theories of why the "memoir bizz" is such a craze:

> There have been a variety of unsatisfactory, if not entirely false, answers – it's the well-worn culture of "me," given an expansive new currency by the infamous baby boomers who can think of nothing else; it's the desire for story killed by postmodern fiction; it's the only literary form that appears to give access to the truth; it's a democratic form, giving voice to minority experience in an anti-elite decade; it's a desire to assert agency and subjectivity after several decades of insisting loudly on the fragmentation of identity and the death of the author. It's voyeurism for a declining imperial narcissism. It's the market. (12)

I disagree with Miller in that I believe we are the "moi" generation. We live in an age where "81 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds surveyed in a Pew Research Center poll…said getting rich is their generation's most important or second-most-important life goal; 51% said the same about being famous" (*USA Today*). Too many desire recognition, even if it is only three minutes of fame on YouTube, or aspire to be America's next top model or idol; the million dollar sole survivor of the Outback; a famous neurosurgeon, or actress, writer etc…The 21ST century more than ever wants an audience to and recognition for the ego. The "memoir bizz" in my mind is motivated by a desire for the ego's stories to become known. James Frey's infamous *A Million Little Pieces* is an example of what one author will do for this recognition. The article "A Million Little Lies: James Frey's Fiction Addiction" states the following:

> Of course, if 'A Million Little Pieces' was fictional, just some overheated stories of woe, heartache, and debauchery cooked up by a wannabe author, it probably would not get published. As it was, Frey's original manuscript was rejected by 17 publishers before being accepted by industry titan Nan Talese, who runs a respected boutique imprint at Doubleday (Talese reportedly paid Frey a $50,000 advance). According to a February 2003 New York Observer story by Joe Hagan, Frey originally tried to sell the book as a fictional work, but the Talese imprint 'declined to publish it as such.' A retooled manuscript, presumably with all the fake stuff excised, was published in April 2003 amid a major publicity campaign. (1)

Frey's memoir that duped Oprah casts a shadow of doubt over the genre as a whole and its ability to ever be trusted again. William Gass, in his piece entitled, "The

Art of Self: Autobiography in the Age of Narcissism," scathingly attacks any kind of autobiographical writing. As his title states, we live in an age of narcissism in which the first person singular writes his life's version high in the saddle of the self. Gass writes:

> The autobiographer will think of himself as having led a life so important it needs celebration, and of himself as sufficiently skilled at rendering as to render it rightly. Certainly, he will not begin his task believing he has led a botched life and will now botch the botch. Unless, of course, there's money in it and people will pay to peer at his mistakes as they pay to enter the hermaphrodite's tent at the fair – ladies to the left, please, then gents, thank you, there to the right, between the chaste screen of canvas. An honest autobiography is as amazing a miracle as a doubled sex, and every bit as big a freak of nature. (22)

According to Gass it is not just the ego puffed-up beyond recognition that is the only problem with autobiographical writing. Truthful memory is also a "freak of nature":

> How does autobiography begin? With memory. And the consequent division of the self into the one-who-was and the-one-who-is. The-one-who-is has the advantage of having been the-one-who-was. Once. The-one-who-was is, furthermore, at the present self's mercy, for it may not wish to remember that past, or it may wish the one-who-was was other than the one it was, and consequently alter its description, since the one-who-is is writing this history and has the upper hand. Every moment a bit of the self slides away toward its station in the past, where it will be remembered partially, if at all; with distortions, if at all; and then rendered

> even more incompletely, with graver omissions and twists to the plot by the play of the pen…

I admit that I too have had the desire to be rich and famous. I am guilty and thus have half a memoir written. I have imagined giving a reading at Barnes and Noble. I have seen myself standing at the podium reading to a packed audience my memoir that is on the best-seller list (of course) with a huge picture (the best and most flattering picture ever taken) of moi, moi, moi spread across the back cover. Yet due to recent family events, I suffer from severe memoir block. I question every page. I have reread my memoir against the grain. I can now see in the pages where I doctored the memory to reveal myself in the best light. With some memories, I think I have exaggerated this story through time and through too many dinner-partied-wine-filled audiences; I am not sure anymore what version is the real one. I also know I am guilty of shaping the memoir so that the very editing, along with the structuring of the memories, is not quite truthful. As Sydney Lea writes in "What We Didn't know We Knew," "…there are the lies that narrative structure often demands: composite characterization, compression of time, omission of unnecessary detail. The literal truth isn't always the artistic one" (331). "Sit still for God's sake!" I scream to my fidgeting children. I scream this now over my fidgeting memoir. I have fifty paltry pages, pages meticulously written, but now mis-remembered, pages trying to move forward into a frustrating cul-de sac of a dead-end warning: Circle around a hundred more times until you find your way to the truth; you won't get there. As I wrote at the beginning of this chapter, I no longer know how to remember. I have been working with an incomplete picture, and now, as new information comes in, an urgent telegram, I must respond, go back into my life in an instant, with my

present self as editor – my memory a sketcher etcher – and reconfigure each memory from a new, disabused perspective. Daily. Why then, would I ever, as a practitioner of trying to capture memory put my faith in memoir? "Memoir loves to go hunting in the dark" (Mandelstam, qtd. in Shields 60). "The genius of memory is that it is choosy, chancy, and temperamental" (Bowen, qtd. in Shields 59).

Even my reading of memoirs has since changed. I now read against the grain and with distrust. In the following section, I have selected memoirs in which writers incorporate the unreliability into their rhetorical strategies, narrative structures and themes. I have found that those memoirs that play with structure and construction of memory in order to reveal the slipperiness and trickery of memory are the ones in which I found the most faith. The following section explores memoirs that bring to the forefront the problematic nature of the genre as well as the challenges a memoirist must face to insure that a remembered life is a truthful one.

The Sick Truth

Lauren Slater's *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* promises us before we even open the book that the memoirist will lie; thus, we have a paradoxical response to the text as we read: we must have faith in the lie. Slater plays with our preconceptions of memoir. We are used to approaching a memoir (if we are the author's intended ideal reader) with the expectation of trusting the life remembered; however, with Slater's *Lying* we read at our own risk. The reader must decide for herself when to believe and when not to. Fact is blurred with fiction; the literal is overpowered by the figurative; nonfiction is compromised by wildly creative liberties. We read this book (about an author's disease) with dis-ease and doubt. The mock memoir mocks memoir in that it questions if any truth

at all is ever possible. If it is not possible to convey in text the whole truth and nothing but the truth, then why not be honest and expose the lying, the exaggerating, the creative liberties? By revealing the lying inherent in memoir, Slater ironically gains our trust. She confesses the truth: she will lie.

The introduction purports to be written by Hayward Kreiger, a professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California. Does a Hayward Krieger actually exist? It is our choice whether or not to give him validity. And if he does not exist, does it matter? Is he a metaphor for Slater's intended ideal reader who offers us a way into the text. "He" writes:

> I first encountered Lauren Slater as a writer when I read her account of schizophrenia in her book *Welcome to My Country*. Since that time I have followed her work, always intrigued by its development. Now, in her third effort, this author brings us a daring meditation on creative nonfiction, a story of epilepsy that is at once entertaining and disturbing. What makes this book disturbing is its incrementally rising refusal to state the facts of the illness about which she writes. By the end of the book, the reader is, indeed, left to wonder whether, or to what degree, Ms. Slater has suffered epilepsy, or if she has used the disease as a meaningful metaphor to convey what are otherwise unutterable experiences in her life.
>
> Using metaphor as a literary technique is not a new concept in fiction; however, using, or suggesting, the use of metaphor as a valid vehicle to convey autobiographical truths – thus her insistence that this book is, indeed, a nonfiction memoir – is a new and unsettling idea. (xi)

We enter a text filled with memoir game-playing. The experience of reading reminds me of the trick my brother played on me endlessly in our childhood. With a basketball in hand, he would face me and say, "Catch!" I would reach my hands out in front of me, flinch violently in anticipation of a fast ball flying towards my face, only to make a fool out of myself since he would fake the throw. Then when he actually did throw the ball, of course I would not fall for it and end up with a basketball to the nose. I learned quickly enough, the smartest thing to do was just to fall for the trick every time. We have no choice when reading *Lying* to fall for the trick every time, or else we should just close the book and tell ourselves this genre game-playing is not for us. Rebecca Mead writes in *The New York Times* that "sickness demands compassion, but one should be forgiven for wanting to throttle this narrator…Is this postmodern fun and games or exasperation? (1). Chapter One's subtitle states with no uncertainty, "I exaggerate." The declaration is given an entire page; the surrounding blankness offers us a moment of contemplation to assess the meaning of this jarring, provocative confession that begins a non-fiction work. "I exaggerate," perhaps is Slater's true two-worded, real-worded foreward (as opposed to the foreward by "Hayward Krieger"), or is it a forewarning? Will we turn the page? And when we do, will we fight it, jerk back from the basketball fake or real throw of it, or will we learn, at least, how to catch it (like a contagious disease), the metaphor of the memoir?

Chapter Two is entitled "Learning to Fall." Slater recounts her experiences in a special school, "a falling school," where physical therapists teach epileptics "the right way to crash" (49). Slater writes, "Day after day the other kids learned. They let themselves loose and went flopping down and survived it all to stand" (49). Slater resists

the fall at first but then eventually learns "to take a deep breath and let [herself] go" as if to encourage us to fall gracefully with her into her world:

> There are two kinds of will. Will A and Will B, I call it. Will A is what we all learn, the hold your head high, stuff it down, swallow your sobs, work hard kind of will. Will B, while it seems a slacker thing, is actually harder to have. It's a *willingness* instead of a willfulness, an ability to take life on life's terms as opposed to putting up a big fight. It's about being bendable, not brittle, a person who is brave enough to try to ride the waves instead of trying to stop them. Will B is what you need in order to fall. It's the kind of will my mother never taught me, and yours probably never taught you either. It's a secret greater than sex; it's a spiritual thing. Will B is not passive. It means an active acceptance, a say yes, and you have to have the voice and courage if you want to learn it.
>
> If you know Will B, you know your life. (53)

There are two types of readers; those with Will A will resist Slater's truth and stand rigid and brittle within the pages. Will B readers will bend and "ride the waves" and thus know a deeper truth that goes beyond the surface of facts. I admit when I read the book the first time, I was the Will A reader who wanted to "throttle this narrator." I did not enjoy being jerked around as if I too had a reader's epilepsy, my mind flopping, clenching and convulsing its way through the confusion of fact and fiction, unable to diagnose this text. Then I became indignant. Even though I was informed to trust the lie, I could not help being seduced into believing the medical passages spliced into the lyricism of the narrator's prose. "The jargon of authenticity" as Adorno says was too convincing:

Dr Carlos Neu, M.D., and Patricia Robinson, P. T.

Abstract

Sixty percent of patients with temporal lobe epilepsy display dysfunctional psychological profiles that include emotional lability mythomania, with all its attended exaggerations and untruths: tendency toward melodrama, hypergraphia and hypereligiosity. This paper addresses the degree to which a successful surgical intervention that reduces or eliminates tonoclonic seizures can concomitantly reduce or eliminate the epileptic's dysfunctional personality style. (98)

It was only upon researching the memoir that I learned the doctors who treated Slater do not exist, and "that Slater subtly changes journal names or provides volume numbers that don't exist and provides content that uses language not known at the time of the particular volume number. No dates are given for any of the citations" (Mead 4). This is an irresponsible memoir, I thought. One should never write about disease so that the casual reader believes the facts presented in the book. The factuality of illness should be in a tamper-proof container. Illness too often humiliates and dupes the patient with its mind-of-its-own power over the body. Does someone who is ill, who reaches out to this memoir for a sense of connection, need to be further humiliated by a text that dupes him/her? Furthermore, Slater is a well-known psychologist, the "doyenne of psychiatric disorder" (*Village Voice*); should she be stretching and exaggerating science and medicine in a mythomanic memoir?

Slater writes about Munchausen's syndrome and about the German man who gave the syndrome its name. Mr. Munchausen "traveled from town to town faking illness." Slater admits that she understands faking illness:

> Now we get to a little hoary truth in this tricky tale. The summer I was thirteen I developed Munchausen's on top of my epilepsy, or – and you must consider this, I ask you please to consider this – perhaps Munchhausen's is all I ever had. Perhaps I was, and still am, a pretender, a person who creates illnesses because she needs time, attention, touch, because she knows no other way of telling her life's tale. Munchhausen's is a fascinating psychiatric disorder, its sufferers makers of myths that are still somehow true, the illness a conduit to convey real pain. (88)

At his point, as much as I advocate personal truth, I thought Slater's memoir abused the truth. Her memoir itself is ill, a schizophrenic Munchhausen memoir filled with false voices and lyrical lore; it seeks attention; it is a diseased Bildungsroman that needs the curative hand of a fact-checking editor to doctor this text and to remind the author her book belongs on the fiction shelf. Yet then I realized the text is contagious. I was suffering from confusion and disorientation. I was undergoing the insanity that illness creates in the writer. Slater is not merely telling the reader about her experience so we become outsiders perfunctorily, passively receiving her pain; she is actively placing her reader within the experience so we have a deeper understanding of the "two-tongued" duplicity of mental illness (97). Her lying is a metaphor for the futility of an "absolutely absolute" diagnosis (96). Thus, I continued to read the memoir from a Will B point of view and to see a deeper truth. Through metaphor, Slater captures (with the literary as

opposed to with the literal) the feel of truth – the emotional truth. "Metaphor replaces fact. Yet the overall emotion is true. The underlying self in all its strange and injured and fragmented constructions is revealed through the metaphor. Is metaphor then reaching some kind of existential truth? Where there is no truth to be reached at least we get closer" (Gilmore 128). Is there legitimacy in a flawed-fact world labeled nonfiction and in metaphor?

Even though Slater's book has frustrated and alienated many readers including me, it is the afterword in which she confesses all, that the method to the madness of her memoir reached me. She lets us in on the game with no equivocation. Her afterword allows us to make an informed choice of whether or not to forgive her liberties and entrust her with our faith:

> In *Lying* I have written a book in which in some cases I cannot and in some other cases I will not say the facts…What matters in knowing and telling yourself is not the historical truth, which fades as our neurons decay and stutter, but the narrative truth, which is delightfully bendable and politically powerful.
>
> *Lying* is a book of narrative truth, a book in which I am more interested in using invention to get to the heart of things than I am in documenting actual life occurrences. This means the text I've created uses, in some instances, metaphors, most significantly the metaphor of epilepsy, to express subtleties and horrors and gaps in my past for which I have never been able to find the words…

> Despite the huge proliferation of authoritative illness memoirs in recent years…memoirs that are often rooted in the latest scientific 'evidence,' something is amiss. For me, the authority is illusory, the etiologies constructed. When all is said and done, there is only one kind of illness memoir I can see to write, and that's a slippery, playful, impish, exasperating text, shaped, if it could be, like a question mark. (221)

Slater's question mark of a meta-memoir calls attention to the very true challenges of "telling yourself." Constructing a self in a textual universe can never be foolproof. That is the point and that is the fact at the heart of *Lying*. For Slater to have written the straightforward authoritative narrative in the shape of a declarative exclamation mark perhaps would have been the biggest stretcher of all.

Lauren Slater influenced my reading of memoirs in that my subsequent readings were traced with a question mark. When I first read Jamaica Kincaid's *My Brother* and then Mark Doty's *Heaven's Coast*, I (once the gullible reader who would give my implicit trust to any work labeled non-fiction) approached the memoirs with circumspection and doubt. Self is hard enough to seal in stone, but when a self then tries to seal another's self, especially one who has died, the stones get slipperier. The writer becomes a sort of literary medium (ghostwriter literally) as he or she channels the dead, speaks for him and reconstructs an interior life from an outside point of view. It is as if the writer is possessed with real-life powers of third-person omniscience, yet we all know omniscience is not possible; in this genre, omniscience is fictional.

It becomes more problematic when excavating the dead in that the dead cannot speak for themselves. The dead are reincarnated into the body of the author who then

ventriloquizes versions of a life lived from his/her own point of view. The dead, at the same time they are textually resurrected, experience a double dying in that the former self passes away as it lives again in another world, that of the author's. The author is in charge now as he/she writes a life from his/her perspective. Jamaica Kincaid in *My Brother* assumes an omnipotent role as she creates this textual life for her dead brother. She does not sugarcoat her brother's life and death with eulogy and euphemism, like a coroner dressing up the dead body with makeup for the open casket viewing; instead, she nakedly (literally) exposes her brother in anything but a flattering light. As Kincaid portrays her brother's struggle with AIDS, she forces us to confront our need for the stand-up and cheer story, one that touches and soothes us through sentimentality, love, redemption and handholding last-breath death scenes. As I read this memoir, I wanted to "remove myself" (108), not from Devon (I felt great pity for him), but from the anger, bitterness, even indifference of the author as she helped her brother die. I wanted the airbrushed version "remade into art." This version would spare us, but this version would not be true; it would be that preened account about which Gass writes that shows us in the most flattering light. Kincaid's mother (we are told by Kincaid), with her convenient ability to not remember the cruelty she inflicted on her children, is guilty of that coroner's makeover of the past. Kincaid writes: "I only now understand why it is that people lie about their past, why they say they are one thing other than the thing they really are, why they invent a self that bears no resemblance to who they really are, why anyone would want to feel as if he or she belongs to nothing, comes from no one, just fell from the sky, whole" (13).

Kincaid, however, claims she does not invent a self: “I do not lie, I do not deny”(20). When she falls from the sky into this memoir, she falls hard on herself and splats with all her guts and no glory revealed. She does not care if the reader likes her or her story (I, for one, do not). She is not writing the perfect story that *sycophants* to the perfect reader. She rubs our noses in the rotting-bodied stench of AIDS and in a culture and family colonized by benightedness and prejudice. Kincaid’s memory, to her mother’s regret, is relentless. The mother tells Kincaid that she remembers too much: “You mine long, you know (75).” Her brother says to Kincaid, “Me think you come for true” (9); indeed, Kincaid does “come for true.” She spares us nothing; the descriptions of her brother’s illness – the toll it takes on his body are merciless, even degrading:

> He suddenly threw the sheets away from himself, tore his pajama bottoms away from his waist, revealing his penis, and then he grabbed his penis in his hand and held it up, and his penis looked like a bruised flower that had been cut short on the stem; it was covered with sores and on the sores was a white substance, almost creamy, almost floury, a fungus. (91)

What happens to the reader’s trust if we dislike or are offended by the author, if the author alienates us enough that we want to turn away from her and remove ourselves? When I teach this book in my memoir course, half of my readers are outraged at Kincaid. “What a brutal bitch,” one wrote in response. I admit; I understand this reaction. My reader-response in graduate school read as follows:

Jamaica, you would be the last person I would want at my deathbed – the last person I would want to write my obituary or eulogy. Don’t hold my hand when I die. I know deathbed scenes; believe me I know. I grew up in a culture where we say, “yes sir”

and “no mam” to our parents. We delivered casseroles to sick neighbors, and we courted the dying with endless flowered and smiling visits to the hospital. My conditioning began at an early age – always on Sundays. After church in my pastel Florence Eisman best and my black patent leather shoes, my Daddy, a doctor, dragged me to the hospital to cheer up his terminal patients while he made his rounds. I hated those black patent leather shoes – those shoes like two shiny beetles on the ends of my legs, and I hated my hair plaited into two prissy braids, scalp burning French braids, that my mama wove from the tip of my forehead down to the middle of my back. I hated the way she often said as she’d furiously braid, “You will behave like a sweet southern girl – just say ‘Happy Sunday’ to everyone you see and no matter what you see, do not show a quiver in that smile on your face… remember,” she braided and added, her fingers like frantic spiders, “they are dying, and most of all don’t scuff up your black patent leather shoes.”

I hated the words *happy* and *Sunday,* and I hated Mama on Sundays – a mortician mother – how she dressed me so carefully for death, dressed me like a stiff doll for the green-jelloed last supper so that there I stood in the hospital under florescent light with giant tulips embroidered on my dress… “Happy Sunday,” I gritted my teeth behind my frozen smile, Mama’s rigor mortis style – “Happy Sunday,” I said through the wetness as they vomited, they coughed, they drooled, they peed. “Happy Sunday,” I smiled through the golf ball, grapefruit-sized goiters and tumors, those skin–stretching, lumpy, bumpy, pus-filled protrusions… “Happy Sunday,” I shouted to the botched suicide attempts with their sewn together leftovers… “Top of the morning to ya” to the moaners and the groaners who had nothing to show for themselves for as Daddy said, “It’s all hidden in their insides.” “Happy Sunday,” I said to one man and so understood when he replied

back at the top of his rotten and raspy lungs through the hole in neck, “Happy,” he croaked and choked as if murdered frogs were down the dark hole in his throat, “Happy Sunday, right back at you. Just for one more cig and ahhhh what a happy Sunday it really could be.”

But no matter what, Jamaica, I touched them all. I made myself take their hands, their desperate claws over steel bed bars – those paws groping at me for the very young life of me. Just don’t scuff up my damn shoes, I’d think, wanting my hand back, and when it was finally given to me, I’d wipe it clean down the sides of my dress – their contagious deaths were all over me. I would fall asleep to their deaths in my breath as a voice chanted in my head, *Happy Sunday. Happy Sunday, one big Happy Sunday for all those who will soon be dead.*

But no matter what, Jamaica, I touched them all.

Happy Sunday Devon.

Obviously, Kincaid and her reaction to her brother’s death has offended my every Florence Nightingale sensibility, and my belief that the sick and dying should at least have their dignity and the rights of privacy. I do not want to honor this glacial and petulant, self-righteous narrator with an ounce of my trust in her words: (“I didn’t care if he got better, I didn’t care if he died…I only wanted him to do one or the other and then leave me alone” (108)). I do not respect her invasion into the private life of her brother who took great pains to maschismo-mask his homosexuality from a world hostile to it. Is it right that Kincaid, not only outed him for the world to read, but also outed him in all his fungi-penis glory? Is it right that Kincaid excoriates her mother (to a world of readers), a woman who also took great pains to deny and rewrite her identity? What about

Devon's side to his own story? Is Kincaid's visceral and embittered posthumous portrayal of Devon slanted due to her anger at her family, her upbringing and her culture? Are her "motives for the enterprise… tainted with conceit or a desire for revenge or a wish for justification?" (Gass 44). We do not know, because the dead cannot rebut with their own versions, versions that might offer a different side to the story so that the truth of this family and of dying is more judicious and comprehensive. Jamaica has the last Happy Sunday word.

Yet…

If we read in the lines of her prose, we can hear the agony behind the apathy. The author's writing style reveals it. She writes in simple sentences which rush and run into one another; commas join, dashes break, and parentheses interrupt short sentences, creating a panicked traumatized voice, a staccato style that chops away at the narrative, hammering hard nails of truth one after another. Kincaid achieves a venting commotion in that one quick thought chases another, perhaps repeats itself (like a ravaged refrain), loops back, and then moves on to the next thought until finally after a long paragraph, there is a period or semi-colon – half stop; full stop! – as if she is catching her breath before she begins running again. Her style reinforces the meandering and breathless process of trying to tamp down memory and make sense of it. Life, family and death are not neat and clean (not easy to catch or construct), nor is memory. Memory is a wheel that grinds on relentlessly at its own out-of control pace. Anna Quindlen writes in her review of *My Brother*:

> Memory feels exactly like *My Brother,* Jamaica Kincaid's account of the life and death of her brother Devon Drew in their homeland of Antigua.

> This book will be described as an AIDS memoir, but that is neither its true purpose nor its power. It is a sustained meditation on the grinding wheel of family, with mother always at the hub; on the countries of our past, both real and emotional, which we have fled and in which we have felt like strangers; on death as a devastating injury and dying as an irritating inconvenience…But it is also a lesson in constructing a memoir that resembles not a neat narrative but the meandering river of human memory, which ebbs and flows and runs white with the rapids of rage and loss and then sags and stalls. (1)

It is Kincaid's meandering that upon further reflection elicited my pity and my trust. The movement of her style authentically captures the helpless exasperation of expressing death and one's reaction to it. The "attempt" to find understanding in the rotating motion of the memory is what "does not lie, does not deny." With time and with the help of my students to whom I taught the memoir, I began to be leery of the euphemizing "I's"; therefore, I grew to respect the author. In sparsely writing the illness of her brother (and in the seasickness of her style), Kincaid ironically finds a bit of full-stop meaning and thus something curative:

> I became a writer out of desperation, so when I first heard my brother was dying I was familiar with the act of saving myself: I would write about him. I would write about his dying. When I was young, younger than I am now, I started to write about my own life and I came to see that this act saved my life. When I heard about my brother's illness and his dying, I knew instinctively, that to understand it, or to make an attempt at

> understanding his dying, and not die with him, I would write about it. (196)

Kincaid's motive in all the acrid commotion became clearer to me. I may not be Wallace Shawn, her long-time editor and mentor, whom she claims will always be her "perfect reader"; I may not ethically, personally agree with Kincaid's memoir, but still, at the end of the day, "I tink she come for true…" Full stop.

Reading Mark Doty's memoir *Heaven's Coast* directly after having read Kincaid's *My Brother* was a jarring transition from one book to the next. With the first page, Doty immediately delivers that pathos and compassion I had longed for in Kincaid's memoir as the author relays his lover's (Wally's) demise through AIDS; however, I could not get comfortable in the narrative until a few chapters in, when Kincaid and her prose style began to slip from my mind. Doty's portrayal of illness and death is other-worldly; the brutality of AIDS lives beautifully in the poetry and lyricism of his prose, yet it was as if I were irritated, post-Kincaid, that Doty would condescend to poeticize AIDS, so beastly and undeserving of an ounce of artistry. Indeed, the trauma is remade into a work of elegiac art in one tome of a eulogy that reads in places like a Greek tragedy or epic: when the men died in the Trojan war, the women pulled their hair out, beat their breasts and gouged their faces as they wailed in motherly mourning to the gods. Doty's memoir, like Hecuba, pulls its hair out and wails to the heavens over the death of Wally, yet after having read Kincaid, the wailing rang loudly saccharine. Through the grief-saturated sentences, I could not get a grounded picture of Wally. After three hundred pages, I did not have a true sense of who this young man was, for Wally was beatified, beautified, euphemized and eulogized to death. With Kincaid in mind, again I

could not help impose my own deathbed experiences onto Doty's portrayal. The daily grind of those dying was rarely smiling, polite, or always loving. At my father's side, through the many years, I have seen regal southern gentlemen and southern belles (who would never in their pre-sickness days slip in their social graces) lash out with scathing rudeness over their pain, their atrophy, their liver-failing, breast-eaten fate. Those who were dying and those who were the helpless and frightened family or lovers were not, from anything I have ever experienced, saintly. Nor should they be. Dying has not been, not once, what movies promised it would be, or anything I would have liked to angelically imagine it could be.

Although Doty conveys the detritus of AIDS symptoms efficiently, it is the author's/caretaker's personality that we come to know well, and his virtuous persona upstages Wally's. Gass echoed from the margins of the page as I read Doty's prose: "The autobiographer tends to do partials, to skip the dull parts and circle the pits of embarrassment. Autobiographers flush before examining their stools. Are there any motives for the enterprise that aren't tainted with conceit or a desire for revenge or a wish for justification? To halo a sinner's head? To puff an ego already inflated past safety?" (11). Doty's voice sanctifies itself with sublime representations of a dedicated caretaker and loving partner "adrift in the sea-swirl of shock and loss…breathing some strange new air, the dizzy-making oxygen of an unfamiliar altitude" (1). He never reveals a realistic Kincaid moment of irritability, fatigue, and frustration, the humbling moments we all have and cannot help when caring for someone who is sick. Doty will not state, like Kincaid, what I have heard from almost every caretaker (even from those I consider the

saintliest) I have ever known through the years: “I am so tired of him being in this state...his demands, in want, constantly with his necessities. I am sick of him” (108).

Yet Doty – albeit in his poetic halo – like Kincaid, does expose a self trying to understand life, love, illness and death. He also exposes the frustration with language as he pursues ways to represent what is incomprehensible to him. Montaigne-like, Doty throws the reader into the movement and chaotic cataclysm of his daily quest to come to terms with an existential torment. “This book was written in the flux of change: I wrote it not from a single still point but in the forward momentum of a current of grief. I wanted to allow for the shifts in my perspective as time moved forward, as what we think of as healing began. What is healing, but a shift in perspective?” (1). Doty reveals to us the process as he stumbles through a “porous state” of the pages (1), and as he creates “some record, however halting, of those days” (2). His memoir is a “halting” hybrid of journal writing, poetry, philosophy, letter writing; he must cover all genres in a desperate attempt to examine death from as many angles as he is able. Donne-like, he gangs up on death attempting to outsmart it. He philosophizes, poeticizes, analyzes the debris of AIDS until he humbles the disease with a death that is utterly dignified in text. Death, be not proud, indeed.

There is nothing cold blue-still about this memoir. His memoir crosses dimensions of time and rhetorical space to disorient us and project us into the instability and loss of control that death and grief cause. Our sense of time is addled since Doty writes in the present tense about what has already taken place. He then revises that present tense and injects new insights from the future:

> The more one tries to live in the present, it seems, the more one learns the inseparability of time, the artifice of our construction of the trinity of experience; yesterday, today, tomorrow meld into one another, blur in and out. We move between them at the speed of memory or of anticipation. Trying to remain in the moment is like living in three dimensions…(7)

The memoir reads like a journal so that we feel the immediacy, the eternal present tense of Wally's demise. Death, mourning, remembering do not conclude in the living, but exist on a daily basis, cold-coloring with a fresh and dryless coating on our identities, and the future is difficult to envision if the past keeps living as if it were the present. Doty writes, "Coming to the end of a novel pushes our attention back to the earliest chapters. We think back through where our characters have been, reexamine their experience in order to see its shape. As life continues, we can't know what turns and surprises its narrative will take. We don't know what we will be able to see in the new lights of the future" (39). The time travel in this memoir creates a sort of readerly out-of-body experience – our minds vertiginous as we look from the heights of the future into the abyss of an AIDS past that feels like the present. Doty's memoir is about finding faith in the future – a future life that has not been killed by a sickened past; however, the author concedes that there is one truth he will never see, the truth of death.

Doty writes of a dead seal on the beach whose eyes have been eaten by gulls. Perhaps we are eyeless as we try to comprehend death; thus, with eyes pecked out, the future, telescoped through the lens of death, is impossible to envision. "Death says, shape it how you will. Open the limits of your thinking or feeling, make room for me, accommodate how you will, nothing touches the plain truth of me" (37). The author is

angered by the impossibility of reaching this plain truth. Language, his medium, no matter how much he experiments with it and tests it, betrays him in the face of death. He cries out, "How can this be written? Shouldn't these sentences simply be smithereened apart, broken by the hurricane?" (259). Metaphor (as it functions for Slater, but not for Kincaid) is what keeps Doty sane and moving in his search for meaning in that metaphor takes us out of the body. It transliterates death, for the "old tongue" that literally speaks does not have the power to word this underworld of grief. Metaphor does not get us all the way to meaning, but it gets us closer to the "edge of the "unsayable," unknowable edge (300). Metaphor may not reach heaven, but it reaches heaven's coast so at least we can imagine what lies beyond, Doty writes:

> Metaphor is a way of knowing the world…my way of knowing experience is to formulate a metaphor which surprises or encapsulates a particular moment. It is a way of getting at the truth. And a way of paying attention, a way of reading the world.
>
> My seal said, The wounded one's gone free, gone swimming into what is familiar to no mortal. (26)

Perhaps metaphor gives us our eyes back, gives us a partial sight that allows us to squint and faintly make out the truth of where the wounded go. The eyes in metaphor are not *sealed*. Since metaphor permits transcendence – again, in a Donne-like victory, death dies, for Wally's life continues beyond it; his life continues in text. Metaphor permits the contagion of AIDS to become a textual virus multiplying, this time around, with life-giving force that is textually transmitted to readers as we join bodies, orgy-like, to continue the procreation of Wally; Wally becomes every reader's offspring:

> Wally is in my body; my body is in this text; this text is light on my computer screen, electronic impulse, soon to be in print, soon to be in the reader's body, yours – remembered or forgotten, picked up or set aside, it nonetheless acquires a strange kind of physical permanence, a persistence….that which cannot be separated, cannot perish. The world has one long-term survivor, which is the world. (9)

It is paradoxical, for as Doty writes of Wally's diminishment, the long bitter years of erasure, Wally appears. It is as if a picture of Wally lies in the tray of a dark room soaking in embalming chemicals. The image is stock-still locked in blank paper; then under dim lights, the face of Wally develops while at the same time the background of Doty's future comes into focus. The last paragraph of the memoir reads the future:

> We have walked into that golden band of light I've been watching. A wild and bracing wind is blowing off the Atlantic, and suddenly the biting air's alive with big white flakes swirling in the shock of the sunlight, and I'm alive with a strange kind of joy, stumbling up the dune into the winter wind, my face full of salt-spray and snow. (305)

Whether we have reservations about the author's angelic representation of self and of his lover, it is the experience of all the metaphorical moving, traumatic traveling, and of "translating grief's country" that in the end speaks the search-lit truth we can put our faith in.

It! Traumatic Truths

Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougow write in their introduction to *Extremities* (a study of how writers and readers understand trauma in memoir and autobiographical

works) that "the task of reading the reports of extreme events…requires an adjustment of our skills as readers" (18). We readers must cope with what Michael Rothberg calls traumatic realism, i.e. "the disorientation that attends the reader's arrival in a universe that violates all expectations. We are forced to reexamine the troubling conjuncture of the extreme and the everyday" (63). It is too strange for me that I sit in my comfortable chair in a warm robe eating a cookie as I read about starvation. The noises of my children playing upstairs interrupt my reading of Nazis shooting babies thrown up into the air. The dog licks me as I read about genocide; my husband peeks into the room and asks if I would like a glass of wine while I look up from a page of spewing diarrhea that AIDS causes. The everyday background just cannot reconcile itself with the extreme that is in front of me, in my hands and in my mind, and I am traumatized in my safe world of home. The crashing clash of the mundane *here* into the catastrophic *there* is too absurd to find coherence.

Years ago I experienced trauma on a Brooklyn street and have since never been able to do justice to the incident's full impact in my narrative portrayal. Language is too neat and silent on the page to shriek the noise of the tragedy loudly enough. I will attempt to capture the trauma again here:

It was in 1999 and I was walking out of a shoe store with a new pair of shoes. Then. Then. There was a slam that screeched and braked through my worries about having spent too much on a pair of sandals. I heard the bluntness of a body-thud hit. A truck skidded. Tragedy crashed through. "Oh my God!" was screamed. In the middle of the street, a woman was lying in blood, a child on top of the woman…a truck driver ran to the woman… "Oh help me God!" he shouted over and over. People were screaming in

a cacophony of horror. A neighborhood drunk ranted over and over, "The mother is dead, the mother is dead. Save the child; the mother is dead!" I threw my new leather shoes onto the ground and ran towards the child. I ran with something primitive that grunted in me, cavewoman, cave-mother like. The child, a little body on top of a bloody mother. I grabbed the boy, who was whimpering and shaking, and while I lifted him off his dying mother, I covered his face with my hands and hurried away from the scene. *This child will not see his mother bleed*…I turned around and looked at the mother. Of course, she will live. (I said this to myself looking at a woman whose head was split open across the pavement.) This is just an everyday sunny day. There she is with her everyday pocketbook. Her shoes are regular ole tennis shoes. There is my deli across the street where I get smoothies every day. She will live then. Of course she will. No, mamas just don't die in the middle of streets.

It was much later I realized I had conflated the everyday and the extreme, the ordinary and the extraordinary. The everyday is what I know. Trauma is a troglodyte and does not belong here on a Brooklyn street. Thus the everyday tennis shoes, the pocket book, my deli were more truthful to me, were what held meaning and what sent me the adrenaline-blasting message that of course the everyday will continue, and the trauma will go back to its ridiculous head-splitting mama-murdering cave where it belongs. But of course it will.

It is so lonely that I do not know how to make my sentence yours….

No matter how much I wail in my prose, you will not get *it* exactly as I did, the street death of Shirley Ottley, her little boy Michael who tried to hold onto me when the EMS took him away. I relay this incident as an example of not only how difficult it is to

write trauma, but also of how difficult it is to transfer the full reality of the event to the reader. *Can I get my sentence into your mind?*

It has been my experience when reading many trauma memoirs that such extremity sometimes disconnects me from reaching the totality of the event. Perhaps traumatic truth is too much striking lightening for "our infirm Delight," and leaves every man a bit blind as the everyday of what we know takes over. It frustrates me then as a reader of trauma. I feel sacrilegious to the text since I cannot wholly/holy live it as if it is mine. Can the grotesque gap not be closed between reader and writer? I am able to identify with the stories in many memoirs and feel their full impact, but the extreme trauma memoirs are indeed another story. It becomes an agonizing reader experience in that I brutalize my brain to put my life into the narrative. I see Will, my husband, covered in sarcomas, with terrified eyes and labored breathing. I see myself walking with my children into a gas chamber. My father, brother, Will and my son have been separated from me; my mother, my sister and daughter walk with me. I see Hutus, Tutsis or the Janjaweed hatcheting everyone that belongs to me. I have traumatized my mind, my entire family in tow, with war travels to Bosnia, Albania, Congo, Cambodia, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran. I have put myself there, and for one spiraling living hell of two minutes, I feel *it*, truly feel the hit of that body on that run-a-red-light truck, but then the everyday takes *it* away, and I know, that I understand only a small bit of the whole of it. I get *it* for longer in dreams, and I awake with the cliché dream dripping; my nightgowns and sheets need to be changed because of *it*. *It* hangs me, noosely, as if there were a neck in my mind, but then throughout the day it dissipates; I no longer dangle from the ceiling but return grounded into what I know.

In this section of this chapter, I reveal my obsession with representation of trauma in memoir and its transmission to the reader. I will concentrate on the Holocaust. I agree with Nancy K, Miller and Jason Tougow when they write that "the Holocaust has produced a discourse – a set of terms and debates about the nature of trauma, testimony and witness, and community – that has affected other domains of mediation on the forms the representation of extreme suffering seems to engender and require" (*Extremities* 4). Through concentrating on Holocaust representations, I do not imply that the Holocaust is the patriarchy of pain and that other extreme events are relegated, tiered in rows, behind it. Part of the reason I have chosen to examine only Holocaust works is that when I was a senior in college, the texts that evolved/devolved out of that history were my first experience with the extreme. I was a virgin to such historical violation. Therefore, it was then that I felt the trauma as fully mine – as if I had lived it. My reaction was a pure one; it is through this purity that I can convey the essence and power of trauma in text. The texts produced an un-jaded response – unbiased, unmediated by time, age, knowledge, texts, or more trauma. It is an innocent reaction to trauma that I present, for in innocence there lives something chastely true. Trust me.

James E. Young When I Was Young

I was in the honors English program at NYU and James E. Young, a visiting and famous scholar, was teaching Literature of the Holocaust. It was indeed an honor to be permitted to learn from him. The first day of class, he warned us that we were now entering into a literary space that would traumatize our minds. He advised us to see him as often as we needed for support. I thought this idea of professor/therapist was melodramatic; however, shortly into the course, I experienced anxiety. My writing began

to deteriorate into something I didn't recognize, because I could not believe the absolute incomprehensibility of what I was learning. (It must be noted that this course took place before the *Schindler's List* days; before the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was built; before the Internet when the Holocaust was not as pervasive in our consciousness as it is today.)

Before this course, I had studied the Holocaust sporadically in history classes and had read *Sophie's Choice*. Now, day in and day out, I lived the Holocaust; it became a fetid scrim through which I viewed my world. We began the course by reading history. We saw films, photographs, and studied the art. Then we read poetry, fiction, memoir, diaries. On a rainy night in November, I attended the anniversary of Kristallnacht at the Jewish Museum. I heard survivors speak; one of the survivors was in the very film we had just watched. In the footage, she was bald, scratching and lice-ridden, dressed in stripes; she was serving soup. She was appallingly gaunt. This anniversary, she was diamonded and Chanel-suited. It was difficult to reconcile; she said that still to this day, nothing has meaning. Words are ruination. Truth has a German Shepherd to attack it. The breaking of broken glass during the night is as it was just then, broken crystal – still. Kristallnacht.

James E. Young had us attack the Holocaust from all sides, with all forms of representation, but no matter how much I worked on my writing to make sense of the literature, history, art through a critical lens (I had no lens for this corpsed life at all), my work would not cohere. Broken glass. Analysis and theory, topic sentences, a simple thesis, the body paragraphs and then a conclusion would not unify; my structure would buckle under the weight of atrocity. I simply could not get *it.* The structure of my

everyday was also listing towards something quite fractured. I felt estranged but at the same time I felt a sense of indignant violation; I needed to rise up and do something immediately, but to rise up for something that happened before I was born – an event that I could not access across time, an event that in my very mind, I could not even access period (on my own safe sofa) – was impossible. I was without context, and my belief systems were razed; thus, I could not find language. "The term trauma describes the experience of both victims – those who have suffered directly – and those who suffer with them, or through them, or for them, if only reading about the trauma" (Miller 2). My writing was traumatized. My writing was in shock.

It was with two memoirs that the incomprehensible though unacceptable became paradoxically accessible to my mind, and that is when I lost it; that is when I went to James E. Young with all my reader-response fury. "I cant read this any more. I can't sleep; I can't write; I can't read this shit anymore!" He asked me what text exactly triggered me to "lose it" and to finally get *"It*." It was with Wiesel and Spiegelman that the whole of the Holocaust hit me. *It* happened. *It* really did. And will again. *It* was a gory, disabused, abused, crass-language moment in his windowless office. I was in no mood for eloquence or sycophantic grammatically correct formality. Literature had violated me, and I was in mourning for mankind, and in mourning for me, a molecule of mankind. "Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, occupies you, takes you over, becomes a dominant feature of your interior landscape. The traumatic experience possesses one, takes one over, and in the process threatens to drain one and leave one empty" (Erickson 458).

Recently, I discovered the article "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching" by Shoshana Felman. Felman writes about that pedagogical punch to the gut of teaching traumatic texts. Through her article, I was vindicated. My nervous breakdown in my writing, my winded writing about the Holocaust, now made sense to me. She writes in a section entitled "The Class in Crisis":

> I realized that something strange was going on when I started getting phone calls from the students at my home at all odd hours of the night or the day, to talk with me…although they did not know what to say: since I felt what they needed was the contact, I simply was receptive to their calls and listened…my students apparently could talk of nothing else no matter where they were, in other classes study rooms or dorms. They were obsessed. They felt apart, and yet not quite together. They sought out each other and yet felt they could not reach each other. They kept turning to each other and to me. They felt alone, suddenly deprived of their bonding to the world, and to one another. As I listened to their outpour, I realized the class was entirely at a loss, disoriented and uprooted. (60)

Felman contends that her class was experiencing an "anxiety of fragmentation" (61). "Her students frantically looked for interlocutors, but expressed their frustration at the fact that everything that they could say to an outsider to convey a sense of the event was just fragments. They could not convey the whole experience"(62). We, who witness the words or the testimony of the firsthand witness, too experience a second-hand trauma. We too, as Paul Celan wrote, have to pass through "answerlessness" – "pass through a frightful falling mute, pass through the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech"

(qtd. in Felman 39). I had no answers in James E. Young's class. He asked me that day in his office why the autobiographical writing was what made the Holocaust real for me. I didn't know then, but I will try to answer his question now, now that language has returned to me. Paul Celan wrote, "Within reach, close and not lost there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language…it passed through and yielded no words for what was happening but it went through those happenings. Went through and could come into the light of day again, 'enriched' by all that" (qtd. in Felman 39).

As I relayed to Professor Young, reading *Night*, and *Maus*, triggered a surreal reality affect in me; it was also through witnessing survivor's testimony. I believe now it is the everyday that spoke to me. The crystal broke right in front of me – intimately and personally. *Kristallnacht.* The historical hugeness of the Holocaust became approachable, and I tiptoed towards it until I became one person's loyal listener/reader/confidante spiritually and with conspiracy. It would be dishonorable to protect myself with, or distance myself from the unreality anymore. I now was experiencing a vile vicariousness. An everyday person (just like me) lived this genocide.

The documentary *The Reporter* follows the Pulitzer-Prize winning New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof through the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is Kristof's life goal to bring a humanitarian crisis into the everyday awareness and consciousness of the world. It is well-known that within the last ten years over five million people have been killed in the Congo by war, sickness or starvation, yet we read the facts and statistics, or see them on the news, then fold the newspaper, turn off the television, and go about our lives. Kristof, however, makes this international apathy

difficult. Laura Heaten writes in her article "Nick Kristof in *Reporter*: A New HBO Documentary":

> He is prepared to do the thing that is the hardest for many people in writing. He is prepared to be predictable; he's prepared to be repetitive. When we look back at the Holocaust, we don't say to ourselves, 'Oh, gosh, can you believe so-and-so wrote 20 redundant columns on the extermination of Europe's Jews?' If it's happening every day, it deserves to be written about every day.' Kristof's strategy, repetitive though it may be, is to zoom in on one person at a time, telling an individual story to illustrate the regional or global problem, rather than focusing on the incomprehensible statistics that readers often gloss over. The numbers are there, but the intimacy with which he tells the stories helps put a name and a face on the suffering, increasing the chances that readers will be moved to respond. The logic behind Kristof's method lies in the work of Dr. Paul Slovic, who studied the psychology behind when people react to atrocities, and found that people begin to lose interest when they are asked to care about the suffering of even two people, rather than one.

It is this violent intimacy that is hard to turn away from. In the first thirty minutes of the documentary, Kristof searches for the one voice that will begin his column. He finds it in a forty-year old woman, Yohanita, who is dying of starvation. Yohanita brings the desensitizing statistics into reality as we witness her inhuman thinness; her bed-sored whimpering and screeching, her eyes that are vacant, yet feral with hunger; her eating food as if she no longer knows what it is. Sustenance has lost its meaning. The "I," a

single "I," that we I-witness holds the power of reaching. Worlds. So to James E. Young, I answer you. It is the "I" in the hurricaned Holocaust that got it to me. That is the power of the first person singular; it is through one singular body-of-a-thud hit, that knowledge, no longer kept at bay, made its impact. Finally, it is through eventual acceptance, I was able to pass through the answerlessness, the "anxiety of fragmentation" and could begin to write again with structures and meaning that cohered rather than incinerated. I realize (through real "I's"), therefore I write. The trauma had subsided and my writing began to heal.

When Night Language Spoke My Language

Since it was so problematic for me (an unspoiled-by-war American) to write a paragraph forty years after the actual event, I have never understood how the survivor, witness, testifier could form a word of the trauma. I had a dream before Young's final exam that I was trying to read a book for the final, but I opened the book and the pages were filled with tiny raised bright orange dots. Yet in some sort of dream-gibberish logic, I understood the neon Braille I was reading. It makes sense to me now that I could, in reality, open a book of extreme trauma and run my fingers across not flat dots, but something barbed on every page that would cut me as I read – a bloody pricking language slicing through my blind ignorance, for language just doesn't cut it in this case.

How does a writer form a coherent truth of torture? Herein is the Holocaust writer's oxymoronic dilemma. How does human language that fills the void of a blank page then sentence the void of human existence? If language were murdered to a burned silence, how does it flame again in voice? How to word meaning out of the meaningless, to build lingual constructions out of totalitarian German Shepherded deconstruction; how

to testify what defies truth; to witness what defies witnessing. In "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle," Dori Laub expresses the difficulty of bearing witness:

> Not only, in effect did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime; but the inherently, incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims…The Holocaust created in a way a world in which *one could not bear witness to oneself*. The Nazi system turned out therefore to be fool proof, not only in the sense that there were in theory no outside witnesses, but also in the sense that it convinced its victims, the potential witnesses from the inside, that what was affirmed about their "otherness" and their inhumanity was correct and that their experiences were no longer communicable even to themselves, and therefore, perhaps never took place. This loss of capacity to be a witness to oneself and thus to witness from the inside is perhaps the true meaning of annihilation, for one's own history is abolished; one's identity ceases to exist as well. (81-82)

It is Laub's belief that there are no witnesses of the Holocaust as it happened in the present tense. Anyone under such a "delusional ideology" (82) could not produce at that time an unviolated, untraumatized testimony. To be an historical, reliable witness would be impossible since the event at the time it occurred had no context, no reference and thus went beyond human comprehension. According to Laub, there were few outside witnesses since the Holocaust was too unreal to be believed. Wiesel writes of what I have grown to think of as the Cassandra of the cattle cars:

> "'Jews listen to me," she cried. "'I see fire! I see flames!'"

> …we tried to reason with her, more to calm ourselves, to catch our breath, than to soothe her:
>
> She is hallucinating because she is a thirsty, poor woman. That's why she speaks of flames devouring her." (*Night* 25)

Indeed witnesses testifying to the outside world as the event was in process were simply considered mad. While I understand Laub's premises, I question the generalizations behind his theoretical perspective that "the event produced no witnesses":

> It was inconceivable that any historical insider could remove herself sufficiently from the contaminating power of the event so as to remain a fully lucid, unaffected witness, that is, to be sufficiently detached from the inside so as to stay entirely outside of the trapping roles, and the consequent identities…No observer could remain untainted, that is, maintain an integrity – a wholeness and a separateness – that could keep itself uncompromised, unharmed, by his or her very witnessing. The perpetrators, in their attempt to rationalize the unprecedented scope of the destructiveness, brutally imposed upon their victims a delusional ideology whose grandiose coercive pressure totally excluded and eliminated the possibility of an unviolated, unencumbered, and thus sane point of reference in the witness. (81)

Not every victim of the Holocaust, as it was happening, lost his/her ability to be a reliable witness. What about many of the diarists who wrote "at the time" the Holocaust was occurring? Is their testimony, as Laub claims, filled with the "loss of capacity to be a witness to oneself?" Many historians, readers and scholars consider the diaries a form of

valid testimony, as valid as memoir. Since the diarists record the present tense, even if they could not fully comprehend or contextualize the devastation, their eyewitness account could be more authentic in its immediacy and urgency than the aged, repressed testimony of the memoirist. The memoirist must depend on time, must count on memory to *flesh* out the truth. The memoirist has a lifetime to construct narrative, scene, dialogue. The memoirist has a lifetime to produce metaphor. It is in this hindsighted construction that contains the elements of fiction.

How then does the memoirist maneuver truth through all the artful construction to get as close to the actual as possible? Many incorporate the insurmountable, the silence, the unreality into their rhetorical strategies and through their symbolism. Elie Wiesel writes in his preface to *Night*:

> Deep down the witness knew then, as he does now, that his testimony would not be received. After all, it deals with an event that sprang from the darkest zone of man. Only those who experienced Auschwitz know what it was. Others will never know.
>
> But could they at least understand? (ix)

In response to the word "know," Wiesel breaks the first paragraph abruptly with silence. He does not reply to it with a definitive, "but they could at least understand." Instead, he poses the question of our understanding. Is it possible that in any way we could fathom? James E. Young in his book *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* argues that for the memoirist the transposition of the actual event into narrative can be an extremely anxious one. As the rupture of the Holocaust enters into construction of narrative and language, what is mangled comes together. In this way, words put a cast

over the breakage. The trauma is soothed. The wound becomes less fractured, for "upon entering narrative, violent events necessarily reenter the continuum, are totalized by it, and thus seem to lose their 'violent' quality. In as much as violence is 'resolved' in narrative, the violent event seems also to lose its particularity – i.e. its *facthood* – once written" (15-16). Young goes on to argue that the disjointed, disorienting *facthood* the writer/survivor has lived to convey becomes compromised through the very act of writing. Narrative threatens the facts of the event since the event now is taken out of the world of its actual occurrence and transplanted into text. The actual is replaced by the literary:

> Like the biblical scribes, Holocaust survivors suspect that if events are perceived after the fact as coming to exist only in their literary testimony, then their experiences might also be perceived as having never existed outside of their narrative. For the diarists and memoirists attempting to document events, the possibility that they are somehow supplanting events – or even creating new ones – in their writing becomes nearly unbearable. (Young 23)

Yet if the violence remains "unmediated, unframed and unassimilated," it ceases to exist and does exactly what the Nazi perpetrators intended: it becomes nothing. Himmler warned, that the Holocaust is to be "a never-written page in history" (qtd. in Young 17). It is understandable, to say the least, why a survivor would want to get as close to the real as possible, as if the writer once again must plead for life, textual life. "It is because reality itself cannot be recorded that realism is dead. All writing, all composition is constructed. We do not imitate the world; we construct versions of it.

There is no mimesis, only poeisis. No recording. Only constructions" (Scholes, qtd. in Young 17). Many Holocaust memoirists attempt to construct their writing naturally, organically as if they were barely reconstructing all the deconstruction. A flourished writing style with poetic language and metaphor beautifies the Holocaust. Aesthetics clash with the black ash, and metaphor (as has been discussed) has the potential to drift us above the literal; however, if we rely on, stay too close to a vacuated account, we are not completely truthful:

> Indeed, to leave Auschwitz outside of metaphor would be to leave it outside of language altogether; it was known, understood, and responded to metaphorically at the time by its victims; it has been organized, expressed, and interpreted metaphorically by its writers…If carried to its literal end, an injunction against metaphors would place events outside of language and meaning altogether, thereby mystifying the Holocaust and accomplishing after the fact precisely what the Nazis had hoped to accomplish through their own – often metaphorical – mystification of events. (Young 91)

Metaphor is innocuous in its ethereal power compared to the grounded head of a reader. We have our entrenched ways of understanding a text. Once the writer has completed the work, he then must let it exist outside of his mind and body. The reader, the eyes to the witness, now has the responsibility to make meaning and to honor the testimony. "But could they at least understand?" The writer must live with the fact that readers may not understand, may misinterpret through their own versions of the event. As the written work enters into the morphing minds of the masses out of control to find its

literary survival, again survival is in the hands of others. Barthes' notion of the dead author acquires a desperate significance. With a single author "dead," there are millions. What will be lost in translations through various cultures, and what is edited out of the original text are crucial. The act of revising and editing becomes a death as the telling gets even slightly sliced. As "the Talmud tells how a brilliant scribe Rabbi Meir was told by his master, Rabbi Ishmael: ' Be careful. Should you omit or add one single word, you may destroy the world'" (Young 21).

Elie Wiesel remained silent for ten years after the Holocaust, for he feared destroying the "cursed universe" with a single word:

> I had many things to say, I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle. It became clear it would be necessary to invent a new language. But how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy? Hunger–thirst–fear–transport–selection–fire–chimney: these words all have intrinsic meaning, but in those times, they meant something else. Writing in my mother tongue–at that point close to extinction – I would pause at every sentence, and start over and over again. I would conjure up other verbs, other images, other silent cries. It still was not right. But what was "it"? "It" was something elusive, darkly shrouded for fear of being usurped, profaned. All the dictionary had to offer seemed meager, pale, lifeless. Was there a way to describe the last journey in the sealed cattle cars, the last voyage toward the unknown? (ix)

Wiesel's memoir is punctured, wounded with questions and then with silence, both of which reflect his eternal state of answerlessness. Silence and the ceaseless unknown were as much a part of the Holocaust as murder was; thus, the unutterable and unanswerable must be incorporated into the representation of the event. Night gropes in the midnight of day for a way to truth and a means of conveying "it," but the truth concludes in the questions rather than in the answers.

There was a time of innocence before the Holocaust when Wiesel studied the Kabbalah "to discover the very essence of divinity" (5). It was a time when "the question and the answer were one," and faith in eternity was intact. The question and the answer subsequently divided as if the former went to the left and the latter went to the right into the night. Wiesel becomes our vicious Virgil as he leads us into the concentration universe. We enter an inverted Bildungsroman where a child devolves (rather then evolves; there is no evolution in a Holocaust universe) into an old man; a child becomes his father's father; a father becomes his son's child; a human mutates into the subhuman; one name disintegrates into numberlessness. An all-powerful God falls to a fallible human at best, or plummets to a God-murderer at worst. Nutrition thins to attrition, and death is the everyday. With day as one long night, a night creature is given birth to with a wailing newborn language transliterated into a cattle-car death rattle. "Suddenly a cry rose in the wagon, the cry of a wounded animal. Someone had just died. Others, close to death, imitated his cry. And their cries seemed to come from beyond the grave. Soon everybody was crying. Groaning. Moaning" (103). We enter the event and become evilly assimilated into a night realm, and we come out of the book into the light with a night nonsense and with our own questions, How can annihilating answerlessness be truth?

"*Was there a way to describe the last journey in the sealed cattle cars, the last voyage toward the unknown?...*

> Could men and woman who consider it normal to assist the weak, to heal the sick, to protect small children, and to respect the wisdom of their elders understand what happened there? Would they be able to comprehend how, within that cursed universe, the masters tortured the weak and massacred the children, the sick and the old? (x)

My Cassandra of the cattle car is symbolic of future generations. Will we believe the fire just up ahead?

I could not, would not until…

Until I read and reread seven simple lines of broken prose. Wiesel's Holocaust spoke my language; the underworded language of the underworld rose to me:

> It was a beautiful day in May. The fragrances of spring were in the air. The sun was setting.
>
> But sooner had we taken a few more steps than we saw the barbed wire of another camp. This one had an iron gate with the overhead inscription: ARBEIT MACHT FREI. Work makes you free.
>
> Auschwitz. (40)

It is this "normal" backdrop of spring inexorably blooming against the forefront of Auschwitz that creates the familiar next to what is foreign and orients us outsiders. Spring is our world. My God, this happens where the sun sets, birds cliché chirp, a simple flower opens in color – scents of blossoming together with burning waft into my window. Auschwitz in the springtime?

Yes. I get it now. Auschwitz hits home.

Wiesel guards a plain (even hackneyed) language, perhaps in an attempt to safeguard the event from being misread, misinterpreted. The simply excruciating is held in a simple and tiny text. Then there is that silence, a stampeding silence, in between the lines of prose. We are left bereft. How do we fill the all-white in between the lines from our precious reader realm? The white silence reminds me of Rothko's paintings in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum – his all-white canvasses at the end of the tour. The white is contemplative and calming in its continuity and permits a respite from a barrage of breakage and dissonance. The white is holy in its quiet and pure power. The white is a clean slate to fill up with the aftermath of our imprints; flashed-bulbed orange, fire and shadows remain behind our eyelids. The white burns in its stillness; it contains the quiet, the dead; the white then rages in the unholiest of ways. White is tortuous. Wiesel has these Rothko ambiguous white-outs between his prose. Wiesel insists that Auschwitz exterminates language, literature, logic, art, imagination (echoing Adorno's famous quotation: "After Auschwitz, poetry is barbaric"); thus, the white-out is not a subtext; it shares the same tragic stage with the written text so that Wiesel creates a purgatory tension between the sayable and unsayable, the living and the dead – inextricably linked, umbilically-corded to a forever darkness. "'Words,'" says one of Wiesel's characters in *A Beggar in Jerusalem*, 'destroy what they aim to describe; they alter what they try to emphasize. By enveloping the truth they end up taking its place.'" (qtd. in Young 22). The nullity then ignites the words – inferno-throated without a sound. Silence for Wiesel does equal truth. Silence is flammable.

It is in the act of writing that there is aggressive survival. “For a man without a Homeland, writing becomes a place to live.” (Adorno, *Minimia* 87). Once again, I agree with my former professor when he writes: “Even if narrative cannot document events, or constitute perfect *factuality*, it can document the *act*uality of writing and text. The writer and his link to the events may thus be reified not in the writer’s words but in the writing activity that brought the words to the page” (Young 37).

The writing proclaims with its very existence that *act*ually *arbeit macht frei,* for voice and silence reincarnate the meaning of those three words. No longer do those words just signify the fatal and fascist definition, for the work of writing now makes freedom. We exist in the tireless work of language. Sisyphus finally heaves his last stone to the top of the hill. It stays there. We defy Himmler’s “a never recorded page in history” with everyday language from an everyday Holocaust boy. With a measly subject, silence; verb, silence; adjective, silence; preposition, silence; noun, and then guided by one I, language in all its human frailty and fallibility inscribes a Sisyphus story onto a wedged and unrolling stoned permanence. (We hear the echo of Celan: “Within reach, close and not lost there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language…it passed through and yielded no words for what was happening, but it went through those happenings. Went through and could come into the light of day again, ‘enriched’ by all that.) Persephone-like, the truth travels from Hades – is for a moment fertile and then returns to the decay. In the balance between the two worlds, we tentatively make questions and find through Wiesel that language is as powerful as it is powerless; there are no answers: that is the silently simple, but traumatic truth.

The Maddened Cap

I fooled myself after reading *Night* by thinking that Spiegelman's *Maus* would be less traumatic. It is a comic book, I told myself. It won't be too real. Comics belong to the world of madcap, to the hero in his red cape and mask who – *zoom, pow, kerplunk, vroom* – defeats the enemy. Truth will be distanced from *zoinking*, snapping, cracking and popping me by the zany animation of an evil Tom chasing the Jerry. I also knew that *Maus* had received, along with praise, much criticism in that it transgressed the Holocaust sacred codes of representation by degrading the conflagration through a genre that is considered low art. As Thomas Doherty writes in his article "Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: Graphic Art and the Holocaust":

> The Holocaust remains one event in the twentieth-century history in which poetic license and tolerant forbearance are not granted automatically…From a traditionalist vantage point, the readily accessible, easy-on-the eye comic book format of Maus would in itself disqualify and indict the work. The comic book is associated with the madcap, the trivial, the childish. By its very nature it seems ill-equipped for the moral seriousness and tonal restraint that have been demanded of the Holocaust art. (71)

Having read Primo Levi and Wiesel before Spiegelman, I could not orient myself into the cartoon world of ethnic genocide, and I admit I did exactly what any survivor lived for me not to do: I relaxed. I relaxed into the framed history of cat Nazis, persecuted Jewish mice, and oafish piggy Poles. The comic form is a fast and easy-on-the-eye read. I was safe in caricatures, but only for a fooled moment. A third of the way into the book, the images having piled too quickly one after another injected an overdose of fast-to-the

vein Holocaust; I no longer could turn the page; cartoon is just as dangerous as any other genre; the Holocaust, in any medium, is fire.

Again it was the everyday that was detrimental to my reading mind. The comic form indeed aided in exposing the absurd tension of the mundane as it lives next door to the Shoah. The coexistence of two such contrasting worlds is, to a certain extent, so surreal, it is comical. I remember now, years ago, when I visited the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial and an American father told his young daughter, "Emily get in front of that oven and let me get a picture of you." She stood next to the incinerator and smiled for the camera. I actually laughed aloud in Dachau at the absurdity of the juxtaposition. (Laughing in Dachau itself is an oxymoron.) However, Emily in front of the camera acted as a foil to the background of barracks, ovens and gas chambers, for the photo op., in its of-this-world, touristy normalcy, in its ignorance and innocence, made the background all that more abnormal. It is this affect that Spiegelman captures in *Maus*. The comic book genre is a foil to the narrative of the Holocaust; the Holocaust gets thrown into an even more sinister focus as it is framed in a comic. *Maus* documents the "unspeakable through the diminutive" (Boston Globe). It is the diminutive in this book that allows the truth of the Holocaust to become tangible. It is also the mundane lives of Artie and his survivor father Vladek that permit the Holocaust to be assimilated by our minds as we see, as well as read, that the unreal happened to very real "people." Indeed, Artie and his father (as mice!) are all too real. They bicker. They argue. They fix the roof. Vladek works irritably in the garage; "plink plunk," sound the nails as he puts them in a jar. The Nazi guns rat-a-tat-tat. Vladek works out on an exercise bike while he relays the Holocaust to his son, "Come we talk while I peddle, he says" (12). The Holocaust

interrupts as naturally as a phlegmy eh-hem in the conversation. Neck-bent corpses hang from trees while Vladek peddles in place. In Vladek's English we hear the survival of Yiddish. We can hear the old world, the first language of the past as it has had to remake itself; the Holocaust speaks through broken English and traces of Yiddish daily. The survivor father is not romanticized; he is not the stereotypical survivor, "guilt-ravaged, saintly, suffering" (Doherty 70). It is uncomfortable to level anyone who is a survivor of the Holocaust to an aged man (mouse) living in Queens who pettily bickers. It is also uncomfortable if any ounce of the Holocaust becomes cliché (dulled from overuse), yet Vladek is a cliché; he is an ethnic stereotype, cantankerous, petty, miserly (Doherty 82); however, in the cliché, there is truth. Vladek is as familiar through cliché as that spring day in Auschwitz. We know him, and his story coming from a stock, recognizable voice orients us too severely.

We see the story unfold as it is being told; the very telling is drawn and spoken, and the past and present meld into an inseparable narrative since the memory of the past cannot be extricated from the present tense, for the past is the present tense's creation. Both stories are revealed in real time; thus, the Holocaust speaks as if it is calling from one neighbor's window to another. The Holocaust has a just-said, wet-black-ink quality to it. We are witnesses to the creation of testimony, and to the creation of the book itself as we join the moving process of remembering and the recording of that memory. Within this macabre movement that catches up to our lives, there is at the same time stillness. The Holocaust is squared and neatly framed in small panels, and the language of the story must fit into the word balloons. The letters that form the words are tiny, thus the events are packed and crammed into one tight space (into one cattle car). It is as if Spiegelman

attempts the impossible: to contain the Holocaust. By framing history in such a minimalist way, and through an informal medium that quickly economizes, Spiegelman traps and captions the hugeness until we are vortexed by the text; we can't get out. With the crude black-and-white pictures, we become a spectator and reader/listener at the same time. The book then is a double dose of truth – truth through language and truth through art. There is no denying what we see in front of us. The paradox is that the fixed and squared frames cause a frantic current of frenzy. The multiple genres heaped onto the pages bombard the brain, as if bullets of genres are flying past us so that our senses become overloaded. Lisa Costello writes in "History and Memory in a Dialogic of 'Performative Memorialization'" that "Vladek Spiegelman's survival of the Holocaust told through his son's interpretation of their interviews is an extreme case of hybridization, combining narrative, autobiography, biography, cartoon, film, and photography into a polyphonic genre" (24). The chaos of the mixing reinforces the chaos of the memory. Through this frenetic concoction, Spiegelman assaults us with multi-forms of representation to emphasize a crisis of representation; the reality of the Holocaust is too much of a superhuman villain for one puny medium. It needs to be attacked from all sides by an advancing mob of as many forms of representation as Spiegelman can phalanx into one book. It's guerilla warfare of the genres until the story revealed comes from one generation to the next, from father to son, and son to reader with no measly madcap *zoink*, but with a mind-maddened urgent thud, that body-hit of a thud that I have never been able to stop hearing. Every day.

Maddened for truth…

Is there an answer to truth's made-ness and madness?

I.

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