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Back For The Summer: What My Audio Slideshow Essay Taught Me About Performativity, The Narrator, And Me

As an almost gluttonous reader of memoir and a scholar interested in just about any form of life writing, I am grateful for the rich set of perspectives, including those on performativity, offered over the last several decades by autobiographical theorists. They have, without a doubt, legitimated my literary gourmandising, as well as helped me refine my critical appetites. Since you can probably hear the caveat coming, I'll just come out and say it: as a practitioner—personal essayist and memoirist—I am somewhat less comfortable with theory in general and not really comfortable at all with what I take to be the most orthodox expression of performativity as expressed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, nor quite at ease with even the more modulated versions as expressed by Paul John Eakin and others. The crispest articulation of performativity's essential premise is from Sidonie Smith who, in response to Butler, reiterates her view that the "interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression ...is an *effect* of autobiographical storytelling" (qtd. in Smith and Watson 214). Eakin's position is slightly more hesitant: "The self of autobiographical discourse," he writes in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* "does not *necessarily* [emphasis mine] precede its constitution in narrative" (100).

My objection to the most emphatic notion of performativity was both visceral and inchoate for most of my life writing life, during which my only medium was silent text on a page. But my recent venture into a new medium—a personal essay called "Back for the Summer" which is a slideshow of photographic images with audio (see www.LiNQ.org.au)—has allowed me to reflect on my life writing experience over the years and to conclude that performativity as a theory seems too limited. To use Lejeune's nomenclature in "The Autobiographical Pact," the notion of performativity does not distinguish between author and narrator and what I take to be the realms of each: processes created by a self focused on procedures for the author, and a product created by a narrated self for the other.

Oddly enough, I first turned to theory in the late 1990s as a paralysed practitioner in the midst of a memoir, eventually published as *A Boy I Once Knew: What a Teacher Learned from Her Student*. Well into my second draft, I, as the author was having trouble with my narrator who, as it happened, was inhabiting two different realms of time: one roughly a two-year period in the life she was living, and the other a 15-year span in a set of diaries she was

reading, left to her by a former student who had died of AIDS. Creating a single coherent narrative in light of the two realms of time was difficult. The additional problem was that there were a series of insights I (now speaking as the narrator) had come to long after the first draft was completed but which, in terms of craft (now speaking as the author), I was having trouble incorporating into the narrative because of where to place such insights in terms of narrative time. I couldn't very well say, "After I finished the first draft, I realised..." so the steps leading to this insight had to be worked in to the already-complicated time-sequencing within the time-frame of the memoir.

The work of James Olney and Philippe Lejeune played a role in giving me a way to think about memory and insight in relation to identity and craft, and encouraged me to believe that I would find my way to a coherent narrative. With Olney, the liberating line appeared in "Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of Bios," where he had written, "Memories and present reality bear a continuing reciprocal relationship, influencing and determining one another ceaselessly." It was a line that acknowledged performativity, though in the context, Olney was trying to establish the relationship between the self living *outside* the text (in what I'll call clock time) and the self of memory created *within* the text (in what I'll call compositional time). For me, however, it clarified the relationship between varying representations of an evolving narrator, all *within* the text in compositional time, and the author who mediated among them, travelling both forward and backward in the manuscript to do so. As the author I understood that if one moment changed for the narrator I was constructing then other moments—leading her to and away from the temporal site of the moment—had to be adjusted.

Olney's line also implicitly acknowledged a text not just as a product, but as inseparable from a developmental process. Implicitly, at least in my mind, Olney's vision was confirmed by Lejeune's observation that an autobiography was identifiable as such if, in a text, author, narrator, and protagonist all bore the same name. Lejeune did not probe how it might come to pass that these three became distinct entities, but his paradigm at least allowed for such speculating to take place.

To put it another way, on the first page of the first draft, my narrator and I had been indistinguishable, but by the first page of the second draft that was no longer the case. First, I as the author who had travelled all the way to the last page of a draft now knew far more than my narrator had known on the first page of a first draft; she had experienced none of the epiphanies that I now knew of. Second, my narrator and I were further distinguished by the tasks—which I have already called narrated and procedural—each of us had. To use a theatrical metaphor, she, the narrator, was the actor, but I, the author, was the playwright, lighting designer, and stage manager. It was my job to shape and refine her ignorance, the better to have it articulate with her eventual insight, but also I had to reconstruct her thinking in order to allow her to have an insight that she had not had by the end of the first draft. She was me, of course, but fashioned by a part of me that she was ignorant of to serve a text which hadn't existed when we both first set out.

The insight I alluded to earlier occurred somewhere between the second and third draft, but had I written the final narrative as it actually occurred—a wandering meandering mess, filled with false leads and wrong turns—no editor would have published it. Instead, the narrator who eventually met the reader was far more perspicacious than I had been, moving forward toward understanding with an admirable economy and grace that had surely not been mine. It wasn't my vanity, or even my constructed version of my recollected past that made me exaggerate the speed of her/my insight. It was that I had an aesthetic responsibility to the reader that she did not have.

And third and last, my narrator and I had different perspectives on the text. As the author, my job was to solve the problems imposed by the genre, whereas my narrator is no more conscious of the genre she inhabits than a fish is of living in water. It was more than that, too. We will likely all agree that meaning is a matter not only of words but of tone. The text on a page is utterly silent, so my job as the author is to do what I can to try to arrange the words, to limit their tonal possibilities, so that the readers will reconstitute them, hearing in their heads the tone I heard in mine. In support of my goal, my agenda may lead me to decisions about diction level or sentence length or descriptive detail that are irrelevant to the narrator.

The final text does not distinguish between the story the narrator wishes to tell and the narrative the author wishes to manage. So, as I said earlier, the available vocabulary of performativity—and this is my primary objection—does not allow us to distinguish narrator from author (a distinction narratologists, such as James Phelan, do regularly make) or product from process. This failure to distinguish limits scholarly scrutiny and leaves an aspect of the text untheorised. Imagine if scientific inquiry about human development ignored conception and gestation altogether! It may well be that this area is not (or not yet) open to scrutiny, but to fail to take it into account is to fail to raise certain questions—all relating directly or indirectly to performativity—because all of them relate to questions in regard to the author and/or narrator. How might we develop a way of talking about compositional time and its inevitable movement back and forth in relation to narrative time? Or what might we ask about the ethics of authorial falsification, if that's the right term, incorporating within the chronology of the text an insight that actually occurred beyond that time?

The occasion for the clarification of such issues grew out of my experience creating, "Back to Summer" where the division of labour between author and narrator became more marked to me than it had been. In a conventional personal essay, the author and her narrator sit at the same computer, look at the same screen, and limit their contributions to words on a page. But working in a new medium made far more obvious the distinctions I have been discussing.

When I began, I had had nothing more in mind than an exercise—a bunch of photographs on a given subject, all to be connected by audio—because I wanted to learn Final Cut Pro X for the courses I teach in journalism. So I poked around looking for plausible material. I taught a summer class and took lots of photographs of my students doing various

assignments, including one in multimedia. A new building on campus was going up, and with my iPhone camera, I could document its progress. And then there was a third: my younger son, Gabe, had moved back home to New Jersey from his apartment in Manhattan for the six week span between June 1st, the date his lease expired, and mid-July, when he would leave for graduate school in Nashville, Tennessee. My students always talk about what it feels like to move back home for the summer where they once again have to follow their parents' rules, and I thought it would be fun, and possibly funny, to document the experience from a parent's point of view.

By the time Gabe departed, I had taken about 200 photographs of his daily life (though none the first two weeks, because the idea hadn't yet occurred to me). I had what Vivian Gornick, in *The Situation and the Story*, would call a "situation" (son, several years post college, moves home for the summer) but no story. But in truth I wasn't even thinking about story because for the two weeks after Gabe's departure, I was involved in a steep and mind-numbing software learning curve, struggling to route the 200 photographs correctly—first to iPhoto on my new MacBook Pro, then to the 'Event' folder of Final Cut Pro X, and eventually to the 'Project' folder. Later on, after the story I wanted to tell began to emerge, I added more photographs—from Gabe's Facebook page, which as his 'friend' I had access to, and also from our family albums.

Images from each of the three sources appear in "Back to the Summer" and are certainly part of the final narrative, one in which I 'perform' my identity as the mother of Gabe. But there is no easy way to think about this entire text performatively. The notion of a narrator who is an effect of her narration isn't textured or capacious enough. How is one to talk about photographs where the author/narrator is the subject, but not in the subject position because she is not the photographer? How are we to talk about photographs of my son where the author/narrator is not the photographer and where the images cannot therefore be said to reflect her subjectivity? On the other hand, what is to be said about the relationship between me as the photographer who took a photo twenty-five years ago and me as the photographer who took a photo two weeks ago? Another problem: there were events the narrator couldn't narrate (and therefore aspects of my identity I was not free to make an effect of my narration) because I didn't have the photographs and also there were events that I might never have narrated, except that I *did* have the photographs.

And so on.

I raise these questions, not because I have answers, but because they point in the direction of further questions that I hope our theoretical constructions will address, especially as life writing enters new realms. I took a quick look at scholarly work to see if autobiographical theorists have written about performativity in regard to autobiographical documentary filmmakers, such as Ross McElwee. There's some scholarship, most notably Jim Lane's *The Autobiographical Documentary in America from the 1960s to the Present*, but not yet what could be called a robust conversation.

I said earlier that at the time Gabe left for graduate school, I had a situation but not a story. Once I had corralled all my contemporary photos on the web page where they needed to be, I took a close look at them. When I looked at the one of Gabe sitting in the truck, just prior to his departure, something about the image of Gabe framed by a vehicle's window of that particular shape tugged at me. It was like a phrase in a song you can't instantaneously identify but which will emerge if you give it a minute. And it did. In a quick sprint through one of the family albums, I found the photo—Gabe at three or four, framed by an open car window, his mouth wide open and displaying a half-chewed chocolate chip cookie. It struck me then, and not for the first time, that in long relationships with those of deep significance to us—lovers, spouses, children, parents—the richness of the connections come because, one way or another, we live the extended emotional history we have with them in each moment. That richness, in the context of arrivals and departures, became the theme of "Back for the Summer," one I built on with other images. The medium wasn't the message but it surely facilitated it: it is not a theme I would have seized on had I not had the images available to me.

Examples such as this—the three-legged race of image and text—abound, but I'll limit myself to one final question: How are we to theorise about performativity, identity, and narrative when parts of this multimedia personal essay remain *un*-narrated (at least in language) but are instead reliant on the juxtaposition of text and image? There are a couple of sentences I attribute to Gabe early in the sequence: "I'll be so neat, you won't even know I'm here, really you won't even know I'm here." But the meaning of those sentences is never actually stated, and is only inflected by the presence of the three images: clothing on the floor, an unmade bed, and four bath towels flung over a stair-railing. This interplay of text and image in relation to performativity—where a single is indisputably the creator of both—is being addressed by emerging scholars (such as Aimee E. Vincent, who in a Master's thesis has written about Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*) and undoubtedly more such explorations are on the way.

New technologies beget new genres. The illuminated manuscript receded and the novel emerged in the wake of the printing press, and thus it continues. In the face of the internet, point-and-shoot digital cameras, and iPhone voice recorders, it is only a matter of time (and I suspect not very much time) until life writing is routinely multimedia in all sorts of ways, and it will likely no longer be accurate to limit the act to one of putting words on a page. On the other hand, no one I know is eager to be designated as a 'content provider', a soulless term if ever there was one. Theorists have given stature to autobiography, and I hope that this will continue. Hence my urging that theory increasingly make provisions for the kinds of distinctions I have been making and that it address the kinds of questions I have been asking are genuinely friendly amendments. That being said, I look forward to further conversation. As for "Back for the Summer," if you haven't seen it, you may consider it an awfully small dog to be wagging such a long and prosaic tail. I don't have any popcorn to offer, virtual or otherwise, but I hope you'll get the picture.

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