

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PERFORMANCE WITHIN THE ACADEMY

The difficulty of writing as an autobiographer and simultaneously as a literary critic is that one trips the other up. My autobiographical self says I must write. I must follow the images in my mind. I must try to recreate my past, as best I can, and fill in the gaps from my imagination. My unconscious will lead the way.

My literary critic says that's the problem. You cannot trust your imagination, nor can you trust your unconscious, to render a reasonably truthful account. To recreate the past accurately, you need to be able to unlearn, or somehow to eliminate all the thoughts and experiences that have intervened since your remembered moment allegedly took place (Eakin "*How Our Lives Become Stories*", 106–107). All these remembered moments have become coloured, distorted, and altered by the in-betweens of your life, as well as by your present experience as autobiographer. And so my autobiographical self is left with a sense of wading through mud.

Lynn Bloom, quoting from Joan Didion's *On Keeping a Notebook*, says writers of creative non-fiction have an ethical duty to "live and die by a single ethical standard...to write *how it felt to me*...That standard and that alone," Bloom argues "is the writer's ethic of creative non-fiction" (277). Writers of such non-fiction, she insists, are duty bound to write "the unauthorised version, tales of personal and public life that are very likely subversive of the records and thus the authority of the sanctioned tellers" (277).

I walk a tightrope here. How much do I write, how much withhold? What about names? Do I change them to protect the privacy of those included in my story, to protect myself from criticism, from accusations of dishonesty, or worse still from litigation? Or do I, as others have suggested, avoid name changes as they might become "the slippery slope to fiction?" (Bloom 278). Certainly in my initial drafts I do not change names, for the very reason suggested by Lee Gutkind (in Bloom), founding editor of *Creative Nonfiction*: "Once you change a name, what else have you changed?" The reader then has good reason to doubt the writer's credibility. But Gutkind's argument fails to recognise the fallibility of memory. If I start by changing names, I tend to use my imagination more, my memory less, but even when I use actual names I cannot avoid using my imagination. The scenes that cross my mind, the memories that come to me, unearthed from my unconscious are suspect, muted by time, rearranged in time, one event telescoped into another. I can never state categorically that what I remember today about a past event is absolutely true. I can only claim it as my experience, my memory, 'how it felt to me'. There are other writers, like Robin Hemly who in *Turning Life into Fiction* argues "that the facts stated must be provably true" (165). But how do you 'prove' something,

especially when so many details contested within families cannot be readily verified?

A writing friend tells the story of how in her early writing career she made the mistake of making a gift of a successfully published short story she had written about her grandmother to several members of her family.

Her aunts were furious.

“You make Grandma sound like an alcoholic,” they said.

When my friend asked how they had surmised this from her story, her aunts pointed out a passage in which my friend had described in vivid detail the image of her grandmother’s knuckled, arthritic fingers folded around a crystal whisky glass.

“Grandma never drank whisky, only ever brandy,” her aunts said. “And she certainly never drank during the day.”

There you have it. A slight alteration of ‘facts’ not only reduced the writer’s credibility in the eyes of her aunts, it made her a dishonest reporter who had wanted to defame her beloved grandmother.

The business of writing can be dangerous. Ignoring it can be equally so. The historian, Inga Clendinnen, in her essay “Agamemnon’s Kiss”, tells us how the Great Inca Atahualpa in Peru, not recognising the gift of a book, “The Book”, from the Spaniards, “took it, turned it over, shook it, smelled it, held it to his ear—and tossed it away” (216). His understandable mistake, in view of the sensitivities of the Spaniards to insult, cost Atahualpa and many of his people their lives. Ignoring books is dangerous, too. But Clendinnen’s stories are largely about groups from the distant past, not individuals and not contemporary autobiography.

Focussing on the work of the neurologist, Antonio Damasio on ‘the body’s story’, Paul John Eakin suggests that the purpose of self-narrative is “the maintenance of stability in the human individual through the creation of a sense of identity” both in the body and mind, a type of homeostasis (“Living Autobiographically” 3). The ‘I’ of the first person according to Eakin—both the ‘I’ narrator and the ‘I’ protagonist—papers over the fact that we are no longer who we were. Each day we wake up a different person. We constantly remodel the past to accommodate the needs of the person we become in the present. Eakin believes, therefore, that the ‘back story’, the story of the story, is as important as the story being told (“Autobiography’s Back Story”).

“I don’t want to do praxis,” my fellow student said to a room scattered with postgrads. During our regular seminar this student was discussing her exegesis, the theoretical component that is attached to her creative thesis, in her case a novel.

"I want my exegesis to be as creative as my fiction, and for this reason I need to go deeper."

"What's praxis?" I asked. In the old days I would have kept the question to myself, not wanting to appear too ignorant. Later, I discover, with help from my supervisor and her dictionary, that praxis is a Marxist term, which involves bringing theory and action together, a sort of 'applied theory' in line with Marx's view that the validity of philosophy lies in its ability to inform our actions. To me the word 'praxis' has all the signs of those heady academic words that people in the university throw around with a nonchalance that suggests *of course we all know what we're talking about*. At the same time there is also a hint of intimidation, a hint that if you don't know what I'm saying then you don't belong here. If you can't speak this academic language, the language of the elites, then you have no right to be among us.

My fellow student did not define the word but went on to describe how she had marked other people's Masters theses in the past. *How TAFE-like they had seemed*.

"Simple descriptive pieces about how I came to write what I wrote, very amateur," she said. "Here, when we're doing our PhDs, we're expected to do more than that." She mentioned Foucault, Barthes, and Baudrillard—names that no longer intimidate me, but names that nevertheless have a ring of authority that says to me again *either you're with us, or you're ignorant and you don't belong here*.

I took notes, fast furious notes, but I could barely keep up with this eloquent student who talked as though she had suddenly discovered the meaning of life, though to give her credit, she checked herself at the end of the seminar.

"I love talking about this stuff as though it's all new, my discovery, but my supervisor gets cross," she said. "He has to remind me that it's been done before. I'm not the first."

The history of postdoctoral study goes back a long way in my family. My fourth brother, ranked immediately above me, was the first to tackle a PhD at the Australian National University in Canberra. His was on Pure Mathematics. I loved to boast about him. We all did. From the time I was little, he was recognised in our family as the 'family genius'. When he was in grade five and shared a seat with my third brother who was a year older, my fourth brother was caught reading *Lassie, the Sheep Dog* under his desk. The teacher did not reprimand him. My fourth brother was always the top of the class. He went to the Jesuit's school, St Patrick's College in East Melbourne. He excelled in Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, and languages. He excelled at everything, except relationships. As he grew older he became more withdrawn and shut off from the rest of us, but he has never lost his reputation, at least in my mind, as the family genius.

My youngest brother came next. He had barely scraped through his final year at school, enough to get him a place in Commerce at La Trobe University in the late 1970s. He lasted about three weeks and spent the rest of the year hitchhiking around Australia. Then he took

a job as an assistant to a private investigator. He spent his days hiding in boxes on the back of trucks spying on people who had made compensation claims. The insurer collected evidence to prove the claims were false. My brother spied on the man with the bad back, who had hobbled into the assessor's office and could barely sit down. He photographed this same man galloping down the garden path with secateurs in hand, bending, digging, and pruning the roses. It was an exciting life for a moment but finally my youngest brother decided to go back to study, starting at Caulfield's Chisholm Institute, then under the TAFE system, and working his way up and into the University of Melbourne where he completed his Honours year in psychology well enough to get a place at Cambridge University. My youngest brother's doctorate was in neuropsychology and audio acoustics, exploring the ways in which the outer ear assists in locating the direction of sounds.

These were the days when I thought a PhD needed to be a completely original piece of work. I could never do a PhD, I knew. I had barely passed statistics in Psychology 1 and doctoral students needed evidence backed by statistical analysis to prove that what they were exploring was original, unheard of before.

No, I could never do a PhD, but I could settle for a professional career as a psychotherapist. A practical training should be enough. Still years after I had finished my first degree, I hankered for more. I felt green, unripe, like an underdone apple hanging from a tree.

One day my bookend brothers, the oldest and the youngest, were visiting my house. The youngest was then still hard at work on his Honours thesis exploring some obscure area of psychology.

"Academics spend their lives examining their navels," my oldest brother said, directing his words to my youngest brother whose face was pink with rage. "They try to find some tiny irrelevant area to explore, write it up and file it away forevermore," the oldest went on. "What a useless exercise."

I did not remind my oldest brother about this conversation when he started his own PhD some twenty years later. He must have changed his mind. He must have decided a doctorate was okay after all. My oldest brother chose to explore decision-making in the context of linguistics at the National University. Another brother took up the gauntlet a few years later, four in all by the time I decided I could join them in postgraduate work.

For years I had harboured the idea of doing a Masters in Creative Writing. Several years ago the writer Olga Lorenzo who took my advanced novel class announced that she would not be returning the following semester as she had been offered a place at Melbourne University to do her Masters in Creative Writing. Maybe one day I could do the same. Three years later, a writing friend announced that she too had decided to begin her Masters in Creative Writing at Melbourne University.

Again the spark flared, this time into a flame. If she could do it, so could I.

My friend suggested I email her supervisor at the university. I arranged to meet this supervisor on a weekday afternoon in her office in the Creative Arts Department. It was spring, the tenth anniversary of my sacking by the analysts. It seemed auspicious that I should start my new journey now.

The Creative Arts Building was at the corner of Grattan and Swanston Streets, a tired looking building that had been built some thirty years earlier to replace the old teachers' college where one of my sisters once studied. I had spent many hours with my sister sitting in the cafeteria of the teachers' college drinking milky weak coffee out of polystyrene cups to while away the time when we should have been studying. In those days university was something to get through robotically. I had lost all love of learning. It seemed too hard. Not for me the grand ambitions of my brothers. I wanted to be a practitioner. I wanted to do things, not talk about them. These thoughts came back to me as I dawdled up the steps of the Creative Arts Building, dry mouthed and fearful of rejection.

"We see a lot of people like you," my would-be English supervisor said, "people who left the university a long time ago, people whose academic record remains untested. It's very difficult to make the transition. Perhaps you could start with a postgrad dip. It'll familiarise you with study again."

I was heavy hearted as I left her room. I did not want to do a postgraduate diploma. I wanted to work independently. I did not want to get back into the classroom for too many hours. If I were not working, if I did not have a family to support, if I had had more time, maybe then, but not now.

"Send me some of your writing," my friend's supervisor said as I turned to say goodbye. "You never know."

I redrafted my proposal to Melbourne University eight times. I sent off copies to academic friends everywhere, all of whom helped me redraft them. I found myself trying to speak the language of academia, not my language but a language I thought necessary to gain entry.

"You have pulled together some interesting ideas," my would-be supervisor wrote in her email. "I must tell you though, that the postgraduate selection committee is consistent (and has to deal with issues of equity) in its view that publications are not sufficient to substitute for an Honours or Postgrad Dip year. We have offered you a place in the Postgrad Dip course and I honestly feel that it would be of great benefit to you. It's fairly clear from your proposal—although you have integrated a lot of ideas very quickly—that you are not familiar with contemporary theory as it applies to the creative writing/literary field. We usually insist on a subject major before admission to Honours but we have made an exception because your publications are particularly good."

The University of Melbourne had rejected me, not fully, but enough to leave me with the same feelings I had that September day in 1991 when the psychoanalysts decided to close their doors to me. In 1989 I had enrolled with the Melbourne Branch of the Australian Psychoanalytic Society to begin my training as a psychoanalyst. After two years the committee responsible for training discontinued my candidature without any clear explanation. My experience of being sacked from the psychoanalytic training created a seismic shift in my sense of self, as if my whole world had been ripped open by an earthquake. I experienced the sacking as a trauma, one that reverberated with earlier childhood traumas, and one which has taken me several years to dismantle. I took to writing then, as a way of helping to heal the wound, but writing itself is fraught with the possibility of rejection. I have needed to develop a thicker skin.

Like all writers I am accustomed to the rejection slip, the form letter that comes in the mail, usually months after I have sent off my writing, the form letter that says, "thank you, but no thank you." No matter how confident I might feel about what I have written, the rejection slip hurts. It rankles. I deal with it by reading the rejection first, then putting it away into the box I hold on top of my filing cabinet. This box is heavy with all the communications I have received over the years about my writing. The rejection slips dominate but they are buried under the weight of other communications and acceptances. I usually respond to a rejection slip by rechecking the piece for legibility and coherence, and then sending it off elsewhere. As Cate Kennedy, the successful Melbourne short story writer has said, each one of her published short stories, including those that have won awards, have been rejected at least once elsewhere. So too, I have learned to keep trying and as the analysts had refused me, and now the University of Melbourne would not have me, (at least not on my terms) I decided to try elsewhere.

The day I met my future supervisor in the Laurent Café in Camberwell to talk about the possibility of postgraduate study at La Trobe University, I went with that sinking feeling again that I would be found unacceptable, under-theorised, inadequate, a fraud. Within the space of our short conversation in the cluttered, clinking neon light glare of the Laurent, my world view changed.

"Post modernist approaches are not the only way," my future supervisor said when I told him about my previous experience. "Humanist approaches are also relevant these days, especially in autobiography and life writing."

Autobiography to me had long felt like a poor relative of serious academic pursuit and its close relative, fiction. I often feel apologetic for my autobiographical impulses, as if in writing about my experience, in writing from the position of the 'I', I am violating everything I have ever been taught. Never start a sentence with the word 'I', always defer to the other. Try third person in fiction or be very avant-garde and try the second, but the first person is too limited, too autobiographical. The omniscient voice, or the voice of another, makes your character stronger, better. Sure, first person is direct, but it can so easily slip into self-indulgence. As well,

there is always the thought at the back of my mind, who would be interested in what I have to say about anything? You're just a girl, you're not an academic, and you're dumb. My list of reasons against writing from the 'I' goes on.

Growing up in a large Catholic family I sensed I must keep a low profile and not draw attention to myself. At school the troublemakers, the attention seekers, the notice boxes as the nuns called them, amazed me. How could they do it so blatantly? How could they demand all that attention? Notice boxes: in my mind's eye I could see the red squat, her majesty's pillar box down the road from our house waiting for letters, waiting to be fed.

I kept my hunger to myself—my hunger for attention, my hunger for food, my wish to be noticed, a secret. The longing grew worse. As an adolescent, each week I pegged clothes to the washing line, load after load. The old wicker basket split at the seams from a week of washing for a family of nine. My voice rose high above the fence tops spilling out onto back streets, rippling through the bones of half-built houses with yards like cratered quarries. I was straining my voice into exaggerated, operatic proportions as I stretched and bent in rhythm with my song. The central pole of the washing line when empty was like a broken umbrella arched over from all the years we'd swung backwards and forwards, up and down on our make-believe merry go round. At the highest point I had to reach on tiptoes while my arms ached with the effort.

Teasing apart the jumbled mass of laundry I tried to bring order to the chaos. I matched clothes and pegs. Red pegs for shirts, blue pegs for underwear, green for socks, until every item of clothing was spread out on the line in what looked like a solid mass of cloth. The white sheets from my parents' bed occupied the outer, widest layer, like the sails of yachts in a vigorous breeze.

Half way through the washing and I was singing at full throttle. I imagined if I sang loudly enough someone would hear and be so taken by my voice, he would be compelled to stop and visit, begging to be introduced to the glorious singer. He would make me famous and I would never need to hang out another sock in my life.

My second supervisor tells me that historians believe they are the custodians of the past, philosophers believe they are the custodians of knowledge, but literary critics, she argues, are multi-disciplinary. They defy these rigid positions. She tells me this in an off-the-cuff way. She is not speaking in absolutes here, she tells me later, but simply wants to reassure me that it is not necessary to adhere strictly to someone else's paradigm. From time to time, I try on the literary critic's hat, I use the critic's broom to sweep up ideas on how to analyse this text or that, but the hat does not sit well on my head and the broom slips from my fingers.

I have considered such ideas as Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author", the idea that as a reader, the text becomes mine. I can interpret it, as I will. Not everyone will agree with me so, in theory, there can be as many texts as there are readers. As a writer himself, Barthes

questioned the position of the 'author', that "the *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us" (1466). He believes that our tendency to 'worship' the author, as if everything derives directly from him, constrains the reader. The text, rather than offering a single, unified line of reasoning from the author-God, provides "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." A 'distancing' from the author makes it possible to read the 'modern' text in such a way that at all its levels the author is absent. Previously the author was seen as the one who preceded the text, who conceived of it and nurtured it. Barthes prefers to think of the author, not as the father or the God-like centre of the text but as the 'scriptor', the one who emerges simultaneously with the text "in which the enunciation has no other content...than the act by which it is uttered." The scriptor takes over from the author and "no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt" (Barthes 1468).

Barthes' "Death of the Author" has proved controversial. The reasons for this, despite the common sense unreasonableness of such a notion as the eradication of the author, particularly if taken literally, is that Barthes' work follows on from "The Death of God" as heralded by the Madman in Nietzsche's *The Joyful Wisdom* (Burke 23). "Both deaths attest to a departure from belief in authority, presence, intention, omniscience and creativity" (Burke 22).

I have considered other ideas such as New Criticism's 'intentional fallacy', the idea that the writer can talk forever about her intentions but it need make no difference to the reader's interpretation. As a writer I may have intended to communicate only so much to my reader but the text is bigger than my intentions. The text has its own life and every reader has her own relationship to it that bypasses me, the writer.

The paradox then lies in the degree to which the reader is often keen to find out as much as possible about the writer. The reader wants to be put in touch with the writer's real experience, to believe otherwise, even when told it is all fiction. 'A true story', we say, as if such a thing ever exists.

The 'true' story behind what I have written above does not include certain details. Details I feel obliged to omit. I wanted to tell the reader my version of my fourth brother's PhD but he has forbidden me to write his name or speak about his activities. How seriously I take my brother's injunction to such censorship, which he conveyed to me in an abrupt email a year ago, is uncertain. For now, I feel an additional pressure from him to be quiet. That is another paradox. As Lynn Bloom suggests, she writes "for the usual reasons writers write about anything important: to get at the truth; to make sense of things that don't make sense; to set the record straight; to tell a good story" (277). But my brother has told me, in relation to him, I must remain silent.

I too, write to have my say, to give my version of events, to offer my record. Add to that my

desire for revenge, which remains an unspoken area in Bloom's analysis, though she does not deny the rage she has felt towards her parents for blotting out certain facts of her early experience, namely that she was the sole survivor of twins.

The way my story flows in the above history of my pursuit of a PhD, is unbalanced. I cannot write more about the brother who has sworn me to secrecy. I must be selective. The more I select, the more I distort the overall picture. I stretch it in one direction or another to suit my purposes, not that I am consciously aware of my purposes other than to write my story as I see it.

Although he does recommend the changing of names, Bill Roorbach in *Writing Life Stories: How to Make Life into Literature* urges "whatever story you have to tell you have to tell exactly and truly...negative emotions and traits, such as jealousy, greed, misery and meanness, are all part of the story—your story—and shouldn't be left out anymore than good stuff should be left out... [W]hen the voice in your head...says, 'Don't tell anyone,' that voice, 'driven by some sense of propriety, or revenge', is 'taking away your story that is, after all 'your life'"(qtd. in Bloom 278-9).

Clendinnen, in an essay that explores the nature and usefulness of reading, adopts "the time-honoured investigative strategy of the Humanities of taking myself as subject to assess grander issues" (Clendinnen 18). Even historians sometimes approve this use of self as a research strategy, but in her *Quarterly Essay* on "The History Question: Who Owns the past?" Clendinnen takes the novelist Kate Grenville to task for her use of 'applied empathy'. In an interview with Ramona Koval on ABC Radio, Grenville has suggested, in contrast to the historian, "let me as a novelist come to it in a different way, which is the way of empathising and imaginative understanding of those difficult events...What would I have done in that situation and what sort of a person would that make me?" (Clendinnen 20). Clendinnen objects to what she regards as Grenville's "playing Blind Man's Bluff in a largely unintelligible world."

"The real past," Clendinnen argues "is surrounded by prickly bushes of what I have to call epistemological difficulties. (From a Handy on-line dictionary: 'In a nutshell, epistemology addresses the questions, Do you really know what you think you know?' You do epistemology all the time—as when you assess the likely truth of a rich piece of gossip.) Access to the actual past is slow, always problematic, and its inhabitants can be relied on to affront our expectations" (Clendinnen 21).

Historians like Clendinnen operate as custodians of the past, whereas, philosophers are imperialists, or so my supervisor says, like Lacan, who arguably tried to take over psychoanalytic theory and re-write it as philosophy. When I was young I thought philosophers were geniuses who plumbed the depths of knowledge in ways other people could not. So it seems in my foray into the world of academe the philosophers, especially the French, have become the high priests of theory, much as the analysts had become the high priests of therapy.

At the Fifth International Autobiography and Biography Association Conference (IABA) in July 2006, there was tacit approval of praxis, but the greatest admiration was reserved for pure theory, with a capital T, as if pure theory alone—the disciplined, the non self-reflective— was the primary goal. The IABA conference title included the term autobiography, “Autobiography and Mediation,” and yet on the final day when the only other self-declared autobiographer alongside me, stood to ask the audience how many were writing their own autobiographies behind the scenes, there was a great show of hands. However, no one else presented personal autobiographical work. It was not sufficiently academic perhaps, though Thomas Couser spoke at one of the keynote sessions about his biography of his father. Perhaps biography, in the degree to which it is seen as about the other, rather than the self, feels a little safer. Yet the child writing about a parent must inevitably be writing about himself.

As Ursula Le Guin writes, father tongue is the language of academia, the language of public discourse. It is a powerful and necessary discourse. How else can we run our countries, how else can we build ships, fly planes, drive cars? But must it always be so formal? Although Le Guin urges that both mother tongue, with its simple repetitive linguistic underpinnings like gently flowing water, and father tongue are of equal value, we tend to reserve our admiration for the latter.

At the IABA conference, a renowned Chinese writer stood up and began to address the crowd in Chinese. One of the conference organisers, Zhao Baisheng, stood beside him at the podium and interpreted. In his introduction, Baisheng made the point that perhaps we English-speaking Westerners needed to know what it was like to be faced with a wall of foreign words. To be left out in the cold silence of incomprehension.

The audience twitched. I sensed not only my own discomfort but also a room full of discomfort. The Chinese writer’s paper rolled in English out on the screen overhead, while he continued to speak in Chinese. In time his efforts at addressing us were cut short. His paper had exceeded the twenty-minute time slot allocated. We were offered the opportunity to read his paper after the event, but for a few minutes the dominant language had taken a back seat. The dominant language had been silenced and another voice in another language entered the room, though not for long.

A lack of familiarity with the dominant language can leave you silenced, disempowered, and no longer able to demonstrate your social skills, your knowledge of the world, your willingness to connect. You are relegated to the corner, an onlooker, at least five steps behind the conversation as it races ahead without you. The way it is for young children, perhaps. The way it was for me, one of the younger ones in a large family who watched her older siblings doing all these amazing adult things that I could only dream of. It aroused the desire in me to run ahead of my time. To read, or at least pretend to read, such books as *Anne of Green Gables* well before I was able to take in its content. I chose that book in the Camberwell Library recognising it by its cover as a book my four years older sister had just finished reading because I wanted to impress my older siblings that I too was smart and capable. It did not

seem a good idea at the time to admit ignorance, to let on that I did not understand. These experiences, added to the fact of my father's wanderings in the night, his visits to my sister, have perhaps contributed to the paradox that is me today, this person at the computer, thumping onto the keys, too loudly, one-handed and slow, but decisively trying to find a voice for 'how it felt' then and how it continues to feel now. To write about the past is to fight through the prickly bushes of fact and fiction. Invariably I wind up scratched.

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