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## Wending Artifice: Creative Nonfiction

### I.

Creative nonfiction is a form of uncommon colloquy, resistant to easy answers, to information mongering, and to definition itself. No wonder, then, that both the practice of creative nonfiction and the thought inspired by it are sites of envy-producing *jouissance*.

As the essay is to the article, so creative nonfiction is to journalism.<sup>1</sup> If conventional journalism transcribes, then creative nonfiction transforms; where one recounts, the other remakes. Rather than take experience as its orienting, originating ground, creative nonfiction turns to language first and last. It does not know what happened without recourse to the narratives available for saying so. It knows that words and their interpretations are everything (nothing neutral in its variegated land), that experience has a syntax, that feelings have a grammar, that rhetoric is not confined to politics, and that the self is equivalent to the set of questions that preoccupies it – sentences to which it has first habituated, and later inured itself (life sentences). It hopes to rewrite those, and the “real” to which such tendencies cling. It believes in such a thing as vital words, and might even be writing for its subject’s life. It can afford to fancy (as a verb) runic words, and the sense that language is our salvation.

Taking words seriously and playfully, hopeful to find a way to think feelings and feel thoughts, creative nonfiction takes nothing for granted, and especially not those necessary but meaningless utterances called “prepositions.” It knows the power of the preposition since it eschews writing “about” (descriptively) and prefers writing from, toward, nearby, athwart, around, inside or out, performatively.

If essays are workshops for making, breaking, and reinventing order, then creative nonfiction is a laboratory for testing the boundaries that divide spheres, modes, and genres of living, thinking, and writing. Creative nonfiction is in this sense a queer genre: it creates a space where sequestered

epistemologies can meet (scholarly and poetic registers, the personal and political, science and art, a working class past and a middle class present). It courts incongruity, discontinuity, dis-identification, and filial impiety. Which does not mean it is not a friendly genre, only that it does not offer immediate recognition. Just as it may be written for a reader who does not yet exist, it does not know what form it will take in advance. It prefers apposition to opposition, synchronicity to diachronic time, and is more often assembled, collaged, combined, and improvised than forced to toe a narrative line. Writers of creative nonfiction share a kinship with mosaic-makers, and poets who, while not without interest in story, are willing to venture a non-narrative narrative prose.

Why refer to this practice as “creative nonfiction” if it looks like prose poetry, uses language non-referentially, and can be listened to like music? While creative nonfiction is not always personal nor explicitly autobiographical, it seems to crave connection, even company, and in this sense, it is interested in the place where the “auto” meets the “bio,” the life of the one and the life of another. There’s a mind here, a body, a person, it seems to say. A localness, a location, and locale. A mood and a milieu. A room. There’s a type of ordinary, and a history – a sensorium of the glimpsed, heard, studied, and remembered. Creative nonfiction’s vantage – I hesitate to call it a self – is importantly poised to witness, and insofar as the creative nonfiction writer is a witnessing subject, she takes responsibility for her representations, walks a tightrope between humility and mastery, and brings to her work an ethical regard.

I think creative nonfiction writers are as interested in the built world – we might even consider them architects of the real – as they are in the found and undiscovered world. Why not consider them archivists of the true, or archaeologists of the actual? They are keen to discern the difference between the collected, the saved, and the kept, and they are handlers of so many improper documents – those cultural templates and literal records that resist our filing systems. The “nonfiction” in that funny phrase – creative nonfiction – is therefore paramount: it signals a different way of enjoining a reader, a directive if not an imperative that we do not necessarily find in poetry or in fiction, and it makes an exquisite demand.

Having said all of this, I am aware that some readers of this *Companion* will not find my portrait of the genre to be companionate with theirs, and that creative nonfiction’s various and shifting, even antithetically conceived frameworks are bound to exasperate a student of the form, an editor or bookseller, an agent or a writer interested in placing and pinning it down. I know that creative nonfiction risks bursting the *Cambridge*

*Companion to Autobiography's* seams, and we'll have reason to discuss the nature of that which binds and separates pages in a book or on the Internet later.

The question of what creative nonfiction is depends on the authorizing source you consult – or, to put it another way, who you talk to. A survey of some key literary journals that have put creative nonfiction on the literary map in the United States paints a picture of such divergent investments that it's hard to imagine that we're all playing the same game. If the journal started in the 1990s called *Creative Nonfiction* (editor, Lee Gutkind) has been mostly interested in narrative nonfiction, *Fourth Genre* (founding editor, Michael Steinberg) has, from the start, been open to experimentation and hybridized form. *Hotel Amerika* (editor, David Lazar) calls for "transgenre writing" inclusive of nonfiction. *The Seneca Review* (editors, the late Deborah Tall and John D'Agata) announced (in 1997) a type of creative nonfiction it termed "the lyric essay." *Brevity* (editor, Dinty Moore) works at the frontier of nonfiction short forms; and a small journal out of Chicago called *South Loop Review: Creative Nonfiction + Art* (editor, Re'Lynn Hansen) publishes Hybrid Essays, Graphic Memoir, Experimental Nonfiction, Montaged Essays, Segmented Essays, Memoir, Memoir Poems, Narrated Photos, and Documentary Art.

Lee Gutkind, writer, major spokesperson for the form, and founding editor of the journal that bears the genre's name – *Creative Nonfiction* – explains in the inaugural issue something that most writers and readers of the form probably do not know: "the phrase was first popularly used as an umbrella ... in the application form for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Creative Writing Fellowship," and it was a "phrase which seemed to have been employed defensively to distinguish between traditional journalism and the personal essay."<sup>2</sup> The desire to bring journalism up to the measure of fine art continues to haunt the genre's discourse. We don't generally turn to the newspaper in search of the beautiful and the sublime; nor does reportage usually enter into discussions of aesthetics. Subsequently, early accounts of creative nonfiction see it as vying for proper attention in the pantheon of high art to the point of offering *apologias* for a form understood to have been ill-treated and debased. In the popular imagination, the great writer is always a novelist; to be an American writer is to be hard at work at the great American novel – even if the novel is dead – which might explain why the new defense of nonfiction manifested in the word "creative" sought to align nonfiction (understood as journalism) with fictive methods, skills, and modes. Whether nonfiction's status as a minor form may have worked to its advantage is never discussed.

Gutkind importantly draws his inspiration from the New Journalism of the 1960s – he cites Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, and Truman Capote, whom he sees as

shatter[ing] the sacrosanct bonds of feature writing by adapting fictional techniques. They captured subjects in scenes, used dialogue, embellished with intimate and substantial description, and included an inner point of view (life through the eyes of the character about whom you are writing), thus adding the “creative” element to what was once an impersonal process.<sup>3</sup>

The essays that inaugurate *Creative Nonfiction* are meant to bring into play nonfictional – understood as journalistic – motives with techniques associated with fiction while honoring the autobiographical contours of the personal essay. “They are obviously essays,” Gutkind explains,

but also contain strong elements of reportage, which is the anchor and foundation of the highest quality of journalism and of creative nonfiction. The word “creative” refers to the unique and subjective focus, concept, context and point of view in which the information is presented and defined, which may be partially obtained through the writer’s own voice, as in a personal essay.<sup>4</sup>

Creative nonfiction, by this account, infuses journalism with subjectivity while maintaining an interest in truth. According to Gutkind, the formulation has been misconstrued by journalists and academics alike, who conflate imagination with “making things up.” On the contrary, I think the problems with the terms and conditions articulated here are of a different order. Creativity, that is to say, cannot be understood as a food additive or cupcake sparkle. It’s not something that one “does” to an already existing material or injects like a vitamin supplement. There is no such thing, in essence, as writing that is not already a form of creating or making. Creativity is an integral and inseparable part of the process, even of the journalism hailed before the advent of “new” journalism. Where “creative nonfiction” is concerned, “creativity” is part and parcel of a consummately conceived process. In other words, insofar as the writing gives the material a reason for being, it breathes life into life. The event exists as writing – as a sharable representation – and not before.

“True stories well told” is *Creative Nonfiction*’s motto, with the obvious echoic analog being “true stories artfully told,” which is Kevin Kerrane’s parsing of “literary journalism” in the introductory essay to the 1997 book he co-edited with Ben Yagoda, *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism*.<sup>5</sup> That the journal *Creative Nonfiction* aligns itself with New Journalism’s principles is clear. What is not clear is why New Journalism needed to be revived if it was already alive and well. The most



remarkable difference between *Creative Nonfiction* and the New Journalism is that where the latter emerged out of urgently articulated political circumstances, creative nonfiction seems devoid of politics. If narrative nonfiction already enjoyed a robust tradition, why do we need to reclaim and rename it for our current moment? In the most recent issue of *Creative Nonfiction*, Lee Gutkind writes: "The fact [sic] that creative nonfiction has become the fastest growing genre in writing programs and the fastest growing genre in the publishing industry proves we have made great progress."<sup>6</sup> But who are "we," and why do we need to make progress? What are the stakes of creative nonfiction's struggle and what are its implications for autobiographical prose?

Creative nonfiction as a category may have incited a definitional crisis that made possible the emergence of new nonfiction forms, but its most ardent energies seem to have been spent on blowing into the bellows of a lexical hiccup that makes the American literary landscape look like a bobble-head balloon in need of popping. I'm talking about the oversimplified iterations of truth and/in nonfiction that the category gave rise to, and the endless wafts of hot air spent on re-inspiring weary binaries: in one corner, imagination, in the other, fact. Always in these discussions, a number of synonymous-seeming terms slip and slide inside a murkily authoritative atmosphere, making one feel that the creative nonfiction writer is on a mission to defend something out of view to us but readily available to him, something that is unassailable, knowable, and sacred. Truth, or fact, or the actual, or the verifiably real is big and absolute in these accounts and debates, indisputable and singular, never multifold or multiple, always author-less, never authored.

"Is it true?" a reader asks the writer of creative nonfiction, and the writer adds the preposition "to" and thus identifies the challenge every creative nonfiction writer has to face: the question of what you want the work to be true to. The possibilities of language? The untried limits of perception? The shape of a real that one has no name for? If truth is at the heart of creative nonfiction (but I'm not sure it is),<sup>7</sup> which truth is it that we have in mind – yours, mine, or ours? And if the writing is true, then must it be faithful, or is it allowed to be errant and promiscuous, aimless and without direction – wander-ful? Creative nonfiction is a form of responsive and responsible writing that is less interested in exactitude – in getting it right – than it is in cutting a path, wending a way to what we know to be true but have no language for.

In a slender volume of short form meditations on psychoanalytic encounters that he calls *Windows*, the French psychoanalyst J. B. Pontalis distinguishes between pursuing an understanding of the world via language, which

is mobile, and via concepts, which are fixed. If you enter something as a language, he explains, you find it wants and needs to travel, and it won't allow you to come to the point, but to wander toward multiple points, arrived at from multiple directions.<sup>8</sup> Pontalis references this need to detour and wander in the context of psychotherapy: the circuitous non-narrative routes a person must take in order to achieve psychological insight and real change in the "talk therapy" that constitutes a psychoanalytic relation. An opening to multiple means and a willingness to travel in unanticipated ways without being dead-set on arrival is what brings creative nonfiction into alignment, not with journalism *per se*, but with that other famously protean nonfiction form, the essay. Try starting out without needing to know in advance where you will arrive: it is the directive of both the essay and of creative nonfiction. Try asking a better question than what it is, like what kind of work does it do? What is the nature of the peaks and valleys of its field of play?

## II.

To begin with the idea of life-writing in approaching creative nonfiction is to be presented with an interesting conundrum, for even if we don't always find attempts at self-representation figuring there, and even if we could demonstrate that creative nonfiction is just a new name for what people have been doing all along, the creation of the category and its staying power seems to reflect a cultural need that has the relationship between life and writing in mind. In other words, even when creative nonfiction does not reference the writer's life, the form still answers to that which life does not typically allow. Creative nonfiction's allowance of a wending repairs a history of the imagination's preemptive intrusion in any writer's life, from childhood forward, but especially in a culture that treats the imagination with a great deal of suspicion. Creative nonfiction writing wanders, waywardly, in an attempt to restore all of the paths that had been cut short, headed off at the pass, derailed, even if worded byways are more dangerous than wooded paths, even if the way of writing is ill-lit, and most of all braced by the uncertainty of solitary passage. It is not beside the point that the genre was birthed on American soil, even if it has begun to be taken up in other English-speaking countries; its preoccupations are those that have dogged Americans for centuries – freedom, democracy, admixture, and a penchant for the real that dates back to the distinctly realist brand of early American gothic fiction, contributes a pragmatist philosophy to the history of ideas, and fuels a wildly popular genre called reality television. American literary history might be rife with forays into the uncanny but ever with Hawthorne's distrustful proviso near at hand: "Keep the imagination sane!"<sup>9</sup>

Aesthetically speaking, creative nonfiction is the most meta of nonfiction forms; subsequently, it is the most usefully self-conscious. Nothing is taken for granted: in its name, truth, experience, and the personal are all put in quotation marks. And here is where the form might be said to depart from the essay: where the essay prides itself on a seeming effortlessness or artful artlessness that we recognize as “voice,” creative nonfiction can afford to be unnatural in appearance. This may have been what John D’Agata and Deborah Tall meant in their original précis of the lyric essay for the *Seneca Review* when they described the “poetic essay” or “essayistic poems” they had in mind as giving “primacy to artfulness over the conveying of information.”<sup>10</sup> “Artful” might resonate in an American imagination with the con of an artful dodge, but it needn’t. The lyric essay’s artfulness is a sign that it was made; the problem is that, in the American mind, artifice is confused with artificiality. America still awaits its Oscar Wilde.

The self-conscious aesthetics of creative nonfiction might make it seem like a literary super-ego, but I think the effect of its self-reflexivity has been to bring nonfiction’s unconscious to light. Creative nonfiction not only allows all manner of flotsam and jetsam to pass through nonfiction’s tightly woven mesh, but it brings nonfiction’s structure, as itself – a sieve – to surface. Still, creative nonfiction is not all cheery and light. Insofar as, like the essay, creative nonfiction serves as a repository of fantasies of freedom, it inadvertently conserves and domesticates as much as it liberates. Even as it propounds a new openness, it seals itself up, cuts itself off, circumscribes, maintains degrees of expedient ignorance, avoids, and forgets. By the looks of it, creative nonfiction is by and large a white middle-class genre whose practitioners are in search of release from constraint. With its clunky and conservative-sounding name, it will never be findable on a Google search of the American avant-garde, and its currently most visible work is to serve as a marketing category for higher education’s most profitable cash cow, the MFA in creative writing degree. Creative nonfiction is not quite a movement so much as it is a moment. It is a recognition mechanism for practices that already existed but hadn’t called themselves such. Unlike the community-based language poetry movement, creative nonfiction serves as a designation that disparate entities can claim, and in doing so, discover others who are speaking the same language. It doesn’t seem to have emerged from within a particular American locale, or ethos, or tendentious fervor. In this sense, it is retrograde, it often retrofits itself onto prototypical versions of itself, and it risks a degree of nostalgia. While it plays in the traffic of truth and the personal, it seems to want to keep to itself – unlike the language poets who freely, openly, and necessarily articulated their poetics with recourse to philosophy, literary theory, and politics.

None of this means that creative nonfiction is not capable of radical work. It is possible that as a genre that nominated itself as such at century's end, creative nonfiction was a response to the cooptation of memoir by the publishing industry. The memoir, as we know, revolutionized autobiography by opening the genre to ordinary lives; by making memory itself autobiography's subject; by moving against the grain of linear narrative; by imagining the life as an endlessly discoverable reservoir of thematic traces rather than an event-driven, developmental chronology; by revaluing the daily, foregrounding the contemplative over the episodic, and reconceiving of meaning at the level of scale (minute particulars being as important as grand narratives) and at the level of time (moments and spots of time being as available to a memoirist's perception as historical markers, cataclysmic shifts, or years). Something happened in American publishers' marketing of memoir, however, that succeeded in construing all memoir as trauma-driven, confessional narratives sure to excite the enthusiasms of a wound-based, talk show culture and its need for voyeurism disguised as edification. The politics of memoir's shifting status are complex, since the marketing forces and publishing moguls that created a need for memoir – working to ensure the genre's salability – subsequently fanned the flames of its lambasting (as some agents are wont to say, “even bad publicity is good publicity”). Anti-memoir screeds are now as ubiquitous as memoir, and with them, an unselfconscious misogyny that aligns personal narrative with femininity, consigning women to the private sphere once again while at the same time domesticating what had, at the outset, represented a new and unplumbed form.

The great experimental filmmaker Maya Deren was known for saying that sound came too soon to cinema since it led to a grafting of stories onto a medium whose unique formal possibilities had yet to be explored. Of course, memoir is hardly dead, but creative nonfiction picks up the thread where memoir's potential for formal investigation left off, prompting the life-writer to identify the narrative conventions that accrue to a particular type of trauma memoir – abuse, abortion, alcoholism, adoption – and to write athwart those. To identify the absent interlocutor who is the tacit addressee of one's prose and consciously replace that persona with another. To understand how the unidentified addressee determines the position that the prose's autobiographical subject can take. To allow the line between biography and autobiography to blur so as to realize that autobiography is also a writing about an other, but an other who is the self; in this sense, to understand all autobiographical writing as an investigation of estrangement.

It should by now be clear that creative nonfiction holds numerous other genres in its net – poetry, journalism, fiction, memoir, biography, documentary, and more – without being reducible to any one of them. It describes

everything and nothing, at the same time that it is a carefully principled writing practice. Does this mean that we wouldn't want to make aesthetic distinctions in its name? Is the point of this essay to help readers know it when they see it? My aim in this essay has been to theorize creative nonfiction rather than to produce a Facebook favorites list. To dictate to my readers who among the literally thousands of creative nonfiction writers they should read seems to miss the point of creative nonfiction altogether. An anti-genre would seem to be against the idea of canons, and creative nonfiction's sterling moment might be that day when it arrives at a place where readers are invited to read writing rather than authors, to eke out styles and novel relationships to language, to find ourselves in a place of collocations: creative nonfiction sharing a room with visual art and music, film and architecture and performance.<sup>11</sup>

Creative nonfiction is a lowly form. (I've noticed that no writer who is already firmly established as a major writer of nonfiction need claim it.) Creative nonfiction is also a major form: the writing either has to be doing something new or it has to be doing something no one has done before or since with nonfiction for the writing to qualify as such – in which case, two of its greatest precursors are James Agee and Roland Barthes, who never heard of the phrase and if they had, would clearly have rejected it.

Creative nonfiction is everywhere. It was there in anthropology's New Ethnography, and in the "personal criticism" of the 1980s at least a decade before it came of age, but it fails to acknowledge either of these modes. If I randomly open three books on my desk, I can find its active presence there in meditations by a diverse group of scholars in search of recalcitrant or restless, hybrid or non-linear forms. Take the opening paragraphs of a collection of essays published in 2003, *Touching/Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, by queer theory's founding intellectual Eve Sedgwick, where she describes her essays' stubborn resistance to linearity as in keeping with her desire to produce "tools and techniques for nondualistic thought and pedagogy."<sup>12</sup> Open the pages of Harvard Divinity School Professor Mark D. Jordan's *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk about Homosexuality* (the 2011 winner of the Publishing Triangle's Randy Shilts' Award for Gay Nonfiction), and Jordan could be describing that drive to invent a form at the heart of all creative nonfiction. "I dreamed of presenting what follows as a polyphony of periodic orations," his book begins, "the salience of one group of voices following another, propelled by deep rhythm, like the flights of sampled solos over the dance beat of house music."<sup>13</sup> And who's to say that Stanley Cavell's collection of autobiographical experiments, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, published in 1994, is not a form of creative nonfiction? Cavell's contention "that there is an internal connection between philosophy

and autobiography, that each is a dimension of the other"<sup>14</sup> reminds us of similarly productive frictions or affinities between creative nonfiction and the essay.

Cynthia Ozick characterizes the essay as "the movement of a free mind at play"; Phillip Lopate calls it a "glorious thought excursion," and I've adapted that as a favorite, most pedagogically winning and succinct definition.<sup>15</sup> In creative nonfiction, the autobiographical is no longer to be found in the "I" that drives the prose, but in thought itself: the essay as a swatch or weave or plaid of thought. What is autobiographical about creative nonfiction is its making manifest a state of mind if not a personality. Types of mind – which are infinite – and the stuff the piece is made from define creative nonfiction's autobiographical shores: the fact of the essay's being articulated from a place here, not there – its unlikely point of departure on a subject and the gathering together of what I call an "uncommon archive" – those myriad, even wildly incompatible texts and interlocutors that comprise your studio of making distinct from mine. Not homework, but work; not requisite reading, but novel juxtapositions gleaned from your own garden of earthly delights: this is where the self resides – in creative nonfiction's manufacture, which is also a way of saying the self is hard to track down. It is an "I" held in abeyance. Or held in the hand.

Indeed, the iPhone, iMac, and iPod, bring us back to a "me"-ness that creative nonfiction must reckon with. One century's people looked into a mirror, while another century's looks into a screen. Imagine an era in which a *Bartleby* cannot exist, in which one can no longer prefer not to, and to "turn one's face to the wall," à la Henry James's Milly Theale is not an option. "She has turned her face to the screen":<sup>16</sup> this is all that any of us can do. Nowadays people live to represent themselves living, either anticipating in advance the transmission of an act by way of a Facebook photo, status line, or tweet, or pursuing particular activities as dictated by their ready translation into the Internet's self-representational modes. The line between art and life has blurred like never before since there is no longer a lag-time between living life and representing it.<sup>17</sup>

How does creative nonfiction address life-writing's future? Most of us have noticed by now that the marks we draw in the Internet's sands are beguilingly evanescent *and* perennial, indelible *and* easily erased. To say it is impossible to hide is an understatement, and yet we can only be "found" in particular ways: the story that can or will be told about ourselves has never been less in our control. Each of us matters more than ever, and not at all; our Facebook status lines have nothing to do with who we are, and are the most available or legible trace of who we are. Amidst new forms of futility and existential angst, creative nonfiction anticipated our current moment,

and works alongside the Internet while also remaining advantageously independent of it. It might be the autobiographical form that is best primed, aesthetically and ethically, to respond to what some might experience as a crisis in the way we perceive and interpret the real; the way we make meaning, remember, and memorialize; the way we make, unmake, and remake the self.

If the Internet acts on attention, then it surely alters how and what we notice or note. As an autobiographical genre, creative nonfiction most resembles the notebook, what ethnographer Michael Taussig defines as “that provisional receptacle of inspired randomness.”<sup>18</sup> Neither the note nor the notebook has been fully exploited or explored, but the Internet turns back to more conservative forms: personal blogs (short for “Web logs”), for example, resemble diaries, following Taussig’s definition again – “that more or less steady confidante of the daily round.”<sup>19</sup> Tweets also resemble diaries, but with the difference that where diaries are generally a form of retrospective and reflective night-writing, tweets recount daily life as-it-happens, at any time of night or day. Perceptually speaking, tweets depend on the fixed glimpse or the stare, rather than the backward glance. Blogs, again, are also akin to letters of a very particular sort: so many letters to the world that never wrote to me, while Facebook accounts accumulate like scrapbooks, or with their “favorites lists,” the commonplace books of yore.

A Facebook status line is not a “short form” in the way that an aphorism is; pared down, it telegraphs but generally doesn’t accede to the place of voluble indwelling – at once spacious and quiet – that so many nonfictive short forms create.<sup>20</sup> It abbreviates, and accumulates, and mostly advertises the self. Still, status lines and other “digitalities” are bound to change the shape of sentences, so writers of creative nonfiction might have to invent a new short form that tweaks the space between the Internet’s insistence on pithiness and the opportunity it affords for endless chatting. We can idealize aphorism as a form to slow us down in the age of the Internet’s presumed speed (and I certainly have), or consider how, in their attenuation of the moment, tweets and status lines actually do, in their way, slow time down rather than speed it up – they fool us into believing that a minute is more accommodating of experience than it really is.

While at work on this essay, I discovered something unexpected. Inside creative nonfiction’s founding documents – at the two endpoints of aesthetic itineraries that couldn’t be further afield – lurked a keynote in common. Lee Gutkind, in his inaugural determinations for creative nonfiction as a journal and a genre, wanted to make journalism personal again – to counter its impersonality, even to re-illumine its immersive energies; Tall and D’Agata, in the *Seneca Review*’s original call for lyric essays, proposed that writers

maintain “the intimacy we have come to expect in the personal essay” but in a manner of voice that is “more reticent, almost coy.”<sup>21</sup> In the first case, we seem to want to smuggle the personal back in through the door of the epistolary traditions from which the “news” originally hailed<sup>22</sup>; in the second case, we are instructed to maintain lyric warmth while generating ironic distance. To make an impersonal genre more personal, or to make a personal genre more impersonal: are these two sides of the same coin? In both cases, there’s a wish for genres to co-mingle at the same time that something remains preserved or unchanged. It’s as though practitioners of creative nonfiction anticipated the rapidly changing representational modalities of the Internet while simultaneously defending against them. These writers must have sensed there was something at stake in the protocols we rely on for establishing intimacy, in conventions of closeness and distance, structures of feeling, and the relationship to an audience. They seemed to know that a pressure was going to be exerted on conventions of presence or absence, solitude or togetherness – even identification, sympathy, and compassion – and, with those, the formal strategies of suture or gap.

Creative nonfiction has its work cut out for it: as it explores new relations of silence and utterance, it could afford to manifest less as written word and more as lecture, talk, reading, or performance, where each of these terms would need to be remade. In a world where the walls dividing compartments in which we stow our pasts erode – I mean the way in which people from different epochs and sectors of our lives come together in the shared room of our Facebook – how we remember is sure to change, and with it life-writing as a form of remembering. Creative nonfiction is an attempt to find a shape not for concepts, *per se*, but for mind, for a thinking ongoing. But as conventions of privacy and publicity, of interiority and exteriority change, so too will our sense of an “inner life,” and with it what we take to constitute thought. Who will compose the sentence that can accommodate that, or will the space between words, like the space between selves, undergo a revolution, and with it the sentence as well? In place of “life sentences,” we’ll have the self in micro-moments and nano-bytes.

In a postmodern age that seemed wholly contemporary, we troubled the idea of the self as self-same. We exposed the lie of seamlessness, and sought to make the self’s seams visible. We questioned who was the keeper of the seams, and whose job it was to smooth the seams over. Like Montaigne, we courted the creation of a self, expecting a monster. If we turn our face to the Internet, the terms of our inquiry might shift to include insulators and filters and shields. Disseminators of self or collectors, we might experience the self as spreading (maybe virally), and trending, or kept altogether in one place. When the means of our making was paper, we thought of ourselves



as tailors, and in some ways we will never be able to sever ourselves from touch, the body, and writing as a form of making – literally, as handiwork – even if today’s method is to point, slide, swipe, or shoot. Even if our touch-pads eventually become voice-activated, voicing and touching are always nearby.

Barbara Lounsberry, in her study of literary nonfiction – yet another book titled *The Art of Fact* – described the scene of Gay Talese’s making:

[He] files his research in shoeboxes. He outlines his books on shirt cardboard. He fastens minuscule swatch-like character cards with tailor’s hat pins to a styrofoam board never far from his typewriter. As he shapes his nonfiction, he seeks to join his scenes into a seamless whole.

Later, when his finished pages are typed and pinned across his study wall, he takes out binoculars and reads his work from across the room – to achieve “distance.”

The above may be taken as a true portrait of a nonfiction artist. Research is prodigious and objectivity conscientiously sought, but the swatches, the hat pins, the shirt cardboard reveal both the artistry and the inescapable subjectivity of the son of a master tailor, one whose carefully crafted garments are books.<sup>23</sup>

An even earlier prototype for creative nonfiction, Osip Mandelstam’s uncategorizable prose piece *The Egyptian Stamp*, achieves a narrative layering of a life, interspersed with, by turns, the dream and the nightmare of the one living the life. Even in translation, one feels in the presence of a new relationship to language in the lines.

I am not afraid of incoherence and gaps.  
I shear the paper with long scissors.  
I paste on ribbons as a fringe.  
A manuscript is always a storm, worn to rags, torn by beaks.  
It is the first draft of a sonata.  
Scribbling is better than writing.  
I do not fear seams or the yellowness of the glue.  
I am a tailor.<sup>24</sup>

Creative nonfiction makes connections between synchronous parts at the same time that it allows the space between experience and perception, accident and invention, the remembered and the retold, the daydream and the nightmare to gape open. What are the synchronies that comprise our days or our lives? How can we give them form without flattening the space between the simultaneities and contrarities that score the day’s page with stripes?

“Should it be personal or universal?” a student asks me of her creative nonfiction memoir at a community workshop. She wants to write about her

relationship to her daughter, how her life has changed since her daughter has left the nest. She's afraid it might be too personal. Who would want to read it? And if too universal, she's afraid of losing the specificity that helps it to feel real. I suggest she ask a different question. "Ask yourself: What is it I want to make from this?" I say. Forget the personal and the universal. Those are meaningless terms. What do you want to make out of this relationship with your daughter that you've never made before? Give yourself the task of writing for the audience that does not yet exist.

## NOTES

- 1 For two of many articulations of this distinction, see Cynthia Ozick who, in her title essay in *The Din in the Head* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 157–162, decries the “masses of articles” that journalism floods the market with, describing them as “verbal packets of information suitable to crowds” over and against “essays of the meditative kind” (159); and William Gass, who sees the essay as the “opposite of that awful object, ‘the article,’” cited in Jeff Porter, “Introduction: ‘A History of the Essay,’” in *Understanding the Essay*, eds., Patricia Foster and Jeff Porter (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2012), xxiii.
- 2 Lee Gutkind, “What’s the Story? #1 What’s in this Name – and What’s Not,” *Creative Nonfiction*, no. 1 (1994). Accessed January 9, 2013: <https://www.creativenonfiction.org/online-reading/whats-story-1>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 See Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda, *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 20.
- 6 See Gutkind on the hubbub sparked by John D’Agata’s *Lifespan of a Fact* (2012), “Doing a D’Agata or a Don’tgotta – Or is it a Daisey?,” *Creative Nonfiction* 44 (Spring 2012): 4–58.
- 7 If what passes for truth is a set of dominant fictions – ideas that, repeated enough, start to seem unquestionable, then the creative nonfiction writer wouldn’t wish to produce truth after all but only anti-truths: to ask the question no one is asking, to admit that the emperor is wearing no clothes. Creative nonfiction aims to trouble, unsettle, and disrupt the truth.
- 8 See J. B. Pontalis, *Windows*, trans. Anne Quinney (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 2003), 4.
- 9 Quoted in David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 258.
- 10 Hobart and William Smith Colleges, “The Lyric Essay,” *Seneca Review*. Accessed January 9, 2013: <http://www.hws.edu/academics/senecareview/lyricessay.aspx>.
- 11 See Jeremy Todd’s *Not Sent Letters* project, “an entanglement ... with technologies of the self, the politics of meaning and the formation of cultural memory, involving online image/text posts, digital film shorts and live events.” Accessed January 9, 2013: <http://notsentlettersproject.com/>.
- 12 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching/Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 1.

- 13 Mark D. Jordan, *Recruiting Young Love: How Christians Talk About Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xix.
- 14 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), vii.
- 15 See Cynthia Ozick, "She: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body," in *Quarrel and Quandary* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 178. And Phillip Lopate, Keynote Address, Nonfiction Now Conference, University of Iowa, November 10, 2005.
- 16 Readers will recognize my riff on the famous declaration and refrain of one of the closing chapters of Henry James, *Wings of the Dove* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982): 369; 372: "She has turned her face to the wall," said of Milly Theale, as she attempts to turn away from desire and toward death, or vice versa. The "wall," at any rate, as a stark signifier of the refusal of a gaze (see *Bartleby*) seems no longer available as a trope, real or literary. We now live in the age of the compulsory screen and its compulsions.
- 17 The absurdist phenomenon of "Planking" or the "Lying Down Game" is one such example. People lie face down in unusual locations, in imitation of a plank, with the aim, in most cases, of posting pictures of themselves more or less playing dead on Facebook. More banal examples might be those defining moments in a day when people find themselves daydreaming one, two, or a plethora of status lines that they simultaneously post.
- 18 Michael Taussig, *Fieldwork Notebooks: 100 Notes, 100 Thoughts*, Documenta 13, (Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 10.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 For a fuller meditation on nonfictive short forms see my review essay, "Abundance of the Short Form," *Water-Stone: A Literary Annual*, 13 (Fall 2010): 265-276.
- 21 See "The Lyric Essay," *Seneca Review*.
- 22 See Jodi Dean, "Cybersalons and Civil Society: Rethinking the Public Sphere in Transnational Technoculture," *Public Culture* 13 no. 2 (Spring 2001): 243-265. Dean maps a movement via Habermas whereby "news-oriented letters evolved into newspapers," with the result that "the personal letter turned inward, coming to represent the deepest thoughts of the soul, its outpourings, sympathies, and longings" (257).
- 23 Barbara Lounsberry, *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 1.
- 24 Osip Mandelstam, "The Egyptian Stamp" in *The Noise of Time: The Prose of Osip Mandelstam*, trans. Clarence Brown (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), 149.

### Further Reading

- Bernard Cooper, *Maps to Anywhere*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990.
- Maggie Nelson, *Jane: A Murder*. New York: Soft Skull Press, 2005.
- Claudia Rankine, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004.
- W. G. Sebald, *The Emigrants*. New York: New Directions, 1996.
- Margot Singer and Nicole Walker, *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.