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## What shall it profit, if I write a spanking good story but lose my soul?

Earlier this year, my auto/biography honours students winced their way through Freud's analysis of Ida Bauer, the young woman he calls Dora. (It took three weeks of Janet Frame, sardonically anti-Freudian, to lower the class's hackles.) Riled on several scores, not least by Freud's assertion that no right-thinking fourteen-year-old girl could fail to be aroused by the advances of a strapping middle-aged Herr K., the class was grimly amused by Freud's 'proof' that Dora masturbated. A few days after Dora's initial denial of masturbation, writes Freud (1997: 68):

she did something which I could not help regarding as a further step towards the confession. For on that day she wore at her waist - a thing she never did on any other occasion before or after - a small reticule of a shape which had just come into fashion; and, as she lay on the sofa and talked, she kept playing with it - opening it, putting a finger into it, shutting it again, and so on. I looked on for some time, and then explained to her the nature of a *symptomatic act*.

Taken out of context, this antagonistic, sex-centric account might read as a parody of the analytic project. And yet, silly though it is to insist that those who fidget with their purses are self-deceiving masturbators (and, as we can safely say from the far side of the twentieth century, silly though it is to suggest that masturbation is linked in any way to illness), there's something beguiling in Freud's reading. Freud implies that the body speaks, produces meaning, regardless of a person's conscious will. His analysis of Dora overflows with examples: she denies masturbating, but her fingers slip in and out of her purse as she does so; she says she doesn't love Herr K., but she suffers from aphonia when he leaves her. Freud may not read these bodily messages rightly, but he is right to recognise that they *are* messages.

The author of an autobiography advances one account of her life, an account that she wills, a deliberate construction-interpretation-representation of her identity. But at the same time, automatically, unconsciously, without noticing, in a moment of distraction, she slips her fingers in and out of her reticule. She omits to mention a significant event. He abuses the apostrophe. The passive voice is used by her, repeatedly. These stylistic tics, messages performed by the body of the text, speak to the autobiography's reader, enable the reader to guess at the author's mental life, the discourses she's dwelt amongst, practised, failed to practise. They enable this sometimes in spite of what the autobiographer intends to reveal. Where we read in order to apprehend an author's identity, everything that the author does or omits to do is a relevant semantic clue.

What happens when these reading practices (practices that assume autobiography as a reification of its author's identity, with all aspects of the autobiographical text, the artful and the accidental, part of that reification) find their way into a life-writing class? And what does what happens say about where we locate autobiography's value? On a more practical note, how can someone who reads autobiography the way Freud reads Dora deal with the normative aspects of the life-writing class, with the need to formulate assessment criteria, with the dynamics of the workshop? Dora is at her most interesting, to Freud, when he believes her to be lying, forgetting, misremembering, or refusing to speak, but how can we accommodate her acts of anti-narrative in our universities' creative writing grade descriptors?

The Victorian obsession with bowel functions and the Victorian obsession with thrift, hard work and laissez-faire social policy meet in few places so telling as Herbert Spencer's autobiography. Two volumes and over a thousand pages long, *An Autobiography*, posthumously published in 1904, is a case study in Victorian literary incontinence (its nineteen appendices signaling the excessive prolongation of Spencer's authorial digestive tract). In its thrifty recycling of letters, reviews, and journal entries, it is also a testimony to Spencer's remarkable capacity not to let anything go to waste. Simultaneously displaying his tendencies to conserve and needlessly to overflow, *An Autobiography* reveals the analogous tension between its author's faith in theoretical capitalism and his personal unfitness for success in a capitalist economy.

Somewhere in the midst of this marvel of prolixity, Spencer mentions that he is philosophically opposed to editing (thus the poetics of libertarianism); the results of this opposition are soaked into the fabric of the text. It is trenchant prose of the most plodding variety, and that's allowing for the fact that it is written in the 1880s by a man who mentions, in his introductory preface, that 'neither in boyhood nor youth did I receive a single lesson in English, and ... I have remained entirely without formal knowledge of syntax down to the present hour' (1904: 1.vii). Spencer is, apparently, indiscriminate in what he includes: if he can remember something, it belongs in his autobiography; if he can find a letter for a particular year, he will quote from it, regardless of its provenance; if he has written a book or an article, he'll summarise it at length. He includes in full his previously unpublished design for a superior hospital bed, and documents the changing state of his innards in sentences not so much syntactically inexact as stunningly opaque.

And yet *An Autobiography* has detained my attention, long enough for me to read it through twice. Spencer's chief intellectual obsession was with synthesising the nineteenth century's increasingly corpulent body of knowledge, explaining all phenomena with the one principle, which he called the 'development hypothesis', something like the process of natural selection. In doing this, he assembled vast quantities of data, fact-gathering with the indiscriminate eye of the objective scientist (the scientist who aspires to objectivity), and he produced volumes and volumes on psychology, sociology, biology, ethics and politics - offering each area of enquiry as an exemplification of the general principle of natural selection. The practices of his life and his life's work are replicated in the writing of his autobiography. As Clinton Machann points out, Spencer's slow and deliberate and overfed narrative is consistent with the aims of an objective scientific account that impartially gathers data, statistics, miscellaneous information. Had an editor performed the sort of radical liposuction on the autobiography that might have enabled it to run to a second printing, its meaning would have been irreparably depleted. Spencer's intellectual method, his obsessiveness, his compulsions are at work in the text as it stands. Because I am interested in

Spencer, in perhaps the first mind to link evolutionary theory with laissez-faire capitalism, in the way such a mind works and such a person feels and thinks, I am interested in his autobiography. And I suspect that in its aesthetic naivety, the autobiography offers us a less mediated access to Spencer's subjectivity. At the very least, its ungainliness is part of its meaning-making.

In my life-writing courses I have tried to position reading autobiography, theorising autobiography and writing autobiographically as related components of the same project. Though creative writing classes often explore and practise creative writing as an end in itself, as a craft, creative writing practice is a useful mechanism for reflecting and commenting on all the things 'critical' courses reflect on, on aesthetics, the mechanics of meaning-making, culture. In the case of life-writing, practice can illuminate questions about autobiographical memory, the relationship between narrative voice and self, the relationship between lived experience and narrative. It can enrich understanding about permissions to tell stories, about the social and ethical and psychological ramifications of confession. All of this can inform students' reading of others' autobiographical texts, and likewise, their reading can inform their writing.

It would be unwise to place Herbert Spencer's autobiography on an undergraduate reading list, but some of my set texts have been chosen, not because they wreak miracles with form and language and narrative, but so that we can read them the way Freud reads Dora, the way I read Herbert Spencer's autobiography - as reifications, simultaneously deliberate and involuntary, of an authorial identity. In circumstances like these, it doesn't take a canny student long to realise that there's a conflict between the teacher's valuing the conscientiously unedited prose of a given set text and the teacher's recommending the desirability of more concrete significant details, pithier sentences, and fewer clichés in the student's own writing.

As for me, reading an undergraduate essay on Herman Melville, I might choke on the author's consistent departures from standard English grammar and mark him down a few points; reading the same student's memoir, I accept that his grammatical idiosyncrasies are inevitably, automatically a means of characterising his narrator. If authorial intention is as inaccessible as poststructuralist wisdom has it, we're in no position to decide whether the act of self characterisation through grammar-mangling is deliberate or not, but even where we suspect we can, an assessment criterion that rewards the artful over the authentic isn't obviously consonant with our ideas about autobiography and identity.

All this is subsidiary to more general problems in creative writing assessment. However honed a teacher's literary sensibilities, those sensibilities are unlikely to transcend the literary culture she's honed them on. No one has an objective 'instinct' for what 'works' (partly because literary 'working' doesn't occur in an objective world; it's located within a reading-writing community), and there have been too many texts falling into and out of fashion for anyone to feel they can arbitrate on aesthetics with complete, time-and-space-surpassing confidence. The obvious response to this is to restore authority to the writer. The reader confesses to her subjectivity, admits that her aesthetic authority is culturally contingent. She allows each piece of writing to establish its own assessment criteria. Her task, then, is to take the text on its own terms, to recognise what those terms are, to establish how effectively the text realises its author's intentions. But here we are again: establishing an author's intentions is no unproblematic task. I read a story by a student who writes about growing up in South Africa under apartheid. There is not a single word in the text to suggest colour. Is this a deliberate and clever comment on

how the language of colour has been travestied by racism, rendered unusable, or has my student simply failed to realise the sensory dimensions of his setting? This is no longer a question about whether we should value a writer's artfulness, but whether we can tell when and if she is being artful.

For some time, I believed that if I made any sort of normative overtures in workshops, suggested any sort of narrative stratagems, recommended that the writer give her characters names, or even just pointed her in the direction of exemplary texts, then I was interfering with the organic process of self-narrativisation.

Here I was reminded of what Herbert Spencer had to say of education. Training, he writes: 'implies a forcing of the mind into shapes it would not otherwise have taken - implies a bending of the shoots out of their lines of spontaneous growth into conformity with a pattern. Evidently, then, a mind trained, in the ordinary sense of the word, loses some of its innate potentialities' (1904: 1.336).

In inculcating certain standards of coherence, orthography, grammar, if I exposed students to texts that privileged concrete imagery over abstraction, or abstraction over concrete imagery, or subjected them to Strunk and White on adjectives, wasn't I forcing, or at least leading, the mind into shapes it would not otherwise have taken, bending the shoots out of their lines of spontaneous growth into conformity with a pattern? Spencer's metaphor is organic, and it suited my anxieties, because I felt that I was interfering with the organic nature of the writer's self. All this assumed that the writer's self is organic, and that the writerly voice is organic too, sprung fully-formed from the authorial throat or fingertip.

A speech therapist I know specialises in teaching transgender people how to learn or unlearn masculinized or feminised forms of vocalisation. The functioning vocal organs of any adult, he contends, can produce sounds that will be perceived by most listeners as the utterances of a woman and can also produce sounds that will be perceived by most listeners as the utterances of a man. The voice I use is not culturally transcendent, not natural or organic, but cultivated - mostly unthinkingly - in order to reify an identity as female, native Australian, adult, educated. Had I left my family when I was five, moved to France and lived there for the next fifteen years, I would have a French accent - but it would be acquired, however inadvertently, rather than innate. The accent I have is also acquired. The fact that I have been acquiring it since birth does not make it any less so.

In this sense, the writerly voice and the speaking one are similar. Both disclose the speaker's identity, yes, but both the identity and the voice that instantiates it are already constructed. The writerly voice is shaped by the writer's lifelong encounters with other texts. If she has read nothing since the age of thirteen but *Xtreme Motorbike Monthly*, chances are, *Xtreme Motorbike Monthly* will have affected how she writes. If he has been reared on an exclusive diet of eighteenth-century sentimental novels, then likewise, they will have shaped how he writes, if in no more complicated way than by equipping him with a particular vocabulary and syntax from which he can pick and choose. There's nothing essential about writerly voice. David Sedaris wasn't born writing like David Sedaris. So if I throw my preference for, say, showing-not-telling, into the mix of often untraceable influences on a person's voice, then I haven't single-handedly shattered the transcendent writerly self. There never was a transcendent writerly self. Indeed, part of the writer's life becomes having participated in a life-writing workshop and loosely adhered to a tutor's and classmates' recommendations for improvement of first draft.

She may not mention the semester she spent in the life-writing workshop when she goes to write her life, but its influence, or, equally interestingly, its failure to influence, will be written into the structure of her text.

I'm no longer so concerned about the threat of the life-writing class to the self-revealing or self-making project of the untrained writer, although I try to avoid overly prescriptive assessment criteria, generally advising that diction, say, be 'appropriate' to the text's purpose, rather than in conformity with any given genre convention. But even the vaguest assessment criteria imply a set of values. In life-writing courses generally these criteria will be something like *individuality*, *originality*, and *craft skills*. Also, as there's no point discriminating in favour of one student because he's given birth to triplets on Mount Everest and against another because his other major is accounting, we are emphatically not grading writers on their lives, and thus we downplay the significance of *what* they narrate and emphasise the significance of *how* they narrate it - the complementarity of form and content. (In this we differ from commissioning editors and recreational autobiography consumers, many of whom, all else being equal, will favour the triplet-birthing mountaineer over the accountant.)

What does this say about the value of autobiography? It says that what makes autobiography autobiography, its referential representation of its author's life, is irrelevant. Fair enough. Not many of us still think of an autobiographical narrative as an unproblematic facsimile of a life anyway. It also says that good autobiography is individual, original, and exhibits its writer's craft skills. It is aesthetically satisfying writing, writing that elicits a feeling of pleasure, whether the pleasure of shock or recognition or sensory titillation.

Noone will object to pleasure-giving texts being brought into the world, but - as with the expectation that readers can make uncomplicated judgements about authorial intention adjudicating texts on the grounds of aesthetic merit doesn't sit comfortably with the theoretical assumptions of modern English departments. Aside from the odd Harold Bloom, 'English' hasn't been prescribing good writing, or even 'literature', for decades. Our use of the word 'text', for instance, owes to our suspicion of canon formation, our awareness that genres are constructed and constantly reconstructed categories, because if we don't say 'text', we've defined the text before it can speak for itself. The prevalence of the term 'text' is some indicator of how far 'English' has gone in trying to avoid the prescriptive and the normative, in striving for the descriptive and analytic. As for autobiography studies (a camp populated by ethnographers, sociologists, literary critics, historians, psychotherapists, writing practitioners): the entertaining or shapely or beautiful autobiography is not necessarily the autobiography that someone like me researches. I read Spencer's autobiography in order to investigate the rhetoric and implications of his self-narrativisation, not to adjudicate, or even enjoy, his individuality, originality or craft skills as a writer.

The value of autobiography, of course, depends on the priorities of its readers and writers and so varies from instance to instance. Laura Marcus (1994: 6) notes that:

A number of autobiographical theorists use the term [literary autobiography] pejoratively; for the historian Georg Misch and the philosopher Georges Gusdorf, for example, the 'literariness' of autobiography implies stylisation, literary conventionalism and, in Gusdorf's argument, commercialism: these militate against the original and authentic use of autobiography 'proper'.

Of course, 'non-literariness' can be an effect of stylisation too, and autobiographers eager to signal their text's 'authenticity' can contrive a 'non-literary' rhetoric. Equally, most writers -even of uncanonised, marginal genres, the everyday forms of life-writing (emails, facebook status updates) - are also readers of those genres, and so have internalised an understanding of those genres' conventions. Literary convention is no more of a threat to authenticity than the conventions of the marginal genres, as classroom experiments in compiling zines, shopping lists, blogs, MySpace profiles will demonstrate.

While Misch and Gusdorf value autobiography for its supposed freedom from convention, the autobiography is nothing if not a convincing representation of truth-telling (Edmund Gosse says that his *Father and Son* is 'nothing if not a genuine slice of life' [1989: 33]); equally, it is nothing if it does not reveal or represent the author's inner life. It's nothing if its subject isn't *someone* (Barack Obama or Sir Edmund Hillary); or most interesting when it speaks for the marginal and the silenced. I mention all these sites of autobiography valuing only to say that they are ignored by our assessment criteria. We do not insist that our students be Barack Obama, nor death camp survivors. We do not insist that they write the truth and nothing but: in fact, we're more likely to suggest fictional techniques. We do not demand inner life or spiritual nudity. All we demand is individuality, originality, and craft skills.

The gaps between the writing self and the written self are smoothed over with language. In their close analysis of autobiographies, my students learn how language works to constitute the appearance of a coherent self, and how it fails. Is teaching the craft of autobiography a matter of teaching students to be aware of the selves they are creating, not to emanate or project selfhood naively, but to consider the autobiographical identity that will materialise somewhere between the text and the reader? Is it to ask them to assume authority over the voice they are constructing, to recognise that they are as present and exposed in that voice as they are in the events that they relate? Is it to teach them to anticipate the repercussions of what and how they write? If this is so then we should assess not what and how they write, but how self aware they are in their writing.

But there's the hole in my bucket. We can't tell how self aware, how consciously intentional a writer is. The best we can do is ask.

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