

# Scruples

## Using Autobiographical Material in Fiction

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MY APPLICATION as an undergraduate to a literary organization had me fielding questions about a certain story I had written about a rockstar type who constantly broke the girl protagonist's heart. The story had puzzled members of the organization but hardly for artistic reasons: they weren't sure which of the boys in the org I had a crush on. Apparently, they were trying to cast each male member in the role of the cool, careless and, naturally, irresistible rockstar, which made me the poor lovesick girl in the story. Around the fifth time I was asked— "Who did you write this about?"— I had become exasperated by their assumption that the story was based on my own love life (which at the time simply did not exist). My own petulant reply was: Why would I bother writing a story about myself?

Almost a decade later, I am preparing to pass a collection of stories for my master's thesis of what some call "autobiographical fiction" or simply fiction that uses autobiographical material, and the arrogance of my undergraduate self haunts me, taunts me with that same question: Why bother writing stories about yourself?

Of course, everybody writes about herself anyway, whether she wants to or not. Some would argue that as writers we hardly do much else, for even in works of pure fantasy we are always present. Wayne Booth's study on point of view insists that "though the author can to some extent choose [her]

disguises, [she] can never choose to disappear” (qtd in Auberbach 7). On a similar note, writer Lorrie Moore refers to the “autobiographical energy” or the “force of imagination and concentration” which goes into the writing of any work, be it a poem, a story, or a travelogue (189). Within this simple humanist logic, anything we create is ours.

But then there is writing *of* one’s self and writing *about* one’s self.

“Autobiographical fiction” is defined by John Gregory Brown as:

... a work where the author exploits the characters and events of [her] own life, where the story [she] tells is, in essence, [her] own life’s story or some portion thereof—the characters and circumstances perhaps altered somewhat from the truth but only enough to keep the story rolling along, to keep it interesting, or to invoke with some measure of clarity the author’s message. (29)

In other words, the paradoxical term is used for this strange thing which calls itself fiction but actually draws material from the author’s life rather than her imagination. It’s the sort of story which might be written by a creative writing major whose first well-meaning mentor says, “Write what you know” advice that immediately leads a beginning writer into tricky terrain. Do I write about esoteric bits of knowledge that I might possess on rock collecting, or do I write about being ten and tight enough with the househelp that I am one afternoon caught by my father playing Ricky Reyes on the houseboy with my mother’s old make-up set? In short, how far (or rather, how closely) should one take such advice? Although the authenticity of detail in a story about rock collecting will surely lend *that* story credibility, it is the latter kind of story which draws on those intimate life experiences, and which involves characters, places and events that correspond to real life which concerns me in this stage of my writing.

It concerns many other writers of fiction, too. Suzanne Nalbantian, in her book *Aesthetic Autobiographies* observes the shift to very personal material in the novels of the early twentieth century, with writers “constru[ing] major events out of the minor occurrences of their own personal lives... recloth[ing] personal facts in poetic relations...” (44-45). This after years of novelists generally drawing material from the “outside world,” like the famous

example of Flaubert writing *Madame Bovary* after having been inspired by a newspaper clipping (Nalbantian 43), and Tolstoy writing *Anna Karenina* after hearing news of a woman's suicide (Moore 51). Given the novel's history, Nalbantian regards as a turning point the publication of such works as Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, and James Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*. These novels Nalbantian credits for ushering in an era of "literary" or "aesthetic" autobiographies (43). Before the twentieth century the autobiography had been a distinct genre with the likes of Rousseau, Gosse, and Cellini proposing to tell the truth, to confess, or to reveal with much candor the facts of their lives in their respective works (44). It was in this intention to be accurate, truthful, or factual that autobiography was linked to history "through [its] cultural and personal referentiality" (44). Today the novels of Proust, *et. al.*, are considered valuable tomes by biographical critics who see mirrored in these novels the writers' life stories, but they are first and foremost, excellently crafted works of fiction. Aesthetic autobiography certainly poses difficulties in classification, but the value of Nalbantian's study lies, at least for a creative writer, in the fact that it tries to identify the various ways in which "life-facts" can take on a new form and meaning through careful crafting, effectively demonstrating Carl Jung's notion of how great works "escape from the limitations of the personal and soar beyond the personal concerns of [their] creator" (qtd. in Nalbantian 45).

Such encouragement is not easy to come by for a fictionist. The innocuous sounding advice "write what you know" often easily dispensed in craft books, arouses a range of reactions from experienced writers. John Gardner, for instance, shifts the young writer's focus away from the subject matter that she/he knows to fictional genres that she/he can manage given her/his level of mastery (18). To Charles Johnson there are far more important things apart from one's own life that might be served well by the writer's attention. He values research, the painstaking process of melding historical fact with imaginative vision (37). As opposed to a mother giving birth to her baby, Johnson views the writer as the "midwife" of stories, her/his task merely to assist in the birthing and then move on to the next delivery (37). Crawford Kilian, problematizing autobiographical novels, observes how writers may use such works to gossip about friends and enemies and lovers, which he

says, some writers can get away with if they are any good. But sooner or later, Kilian says, perceptive readers begin to get disturbed by what the novels reveal about the gossipers themselves. Kilian uses Hemingway as an example saying “[his] heroes got older, and his heroines younger and [readers] knew more than [they] wanted to about [his] sexual hang-ups.”

On the other hand, Graham Swill strongly believes in fiction’s “therapeutic” function in that it helps us “recover our lost and damaged pasts” (23). But in the same breath he challenges the assumption that writing is an autobiographical process where writers “exploit” or “sublimate” their own personal experiences, and then advises writers to do anything but (24). To Swift, imagination is the way; discovery is the prize. This circuitous route which takes us away from ourselves in order to lead us back to ourselves appears to be the writer’s, ahem, politically correct path.

This same prejudice is minored by writers elsewhere. I remember one relatively painless workshop that had left me feeling pleased with myself until a classmate of mine remarked coldly: “*Eh, nangyari naman yan sayo e.*” I have long since concluded that this classmate of mine is a bit of a worm, but I have never been able to shake off the feeling that in using personal material I had cheated somehow, that instead of that path of imagination and discovery, I had opted to take a shortcut in using my own life.

Swift’s attitude, I believe, and my own uneasiness with the work I am doing, points to the underlying question of how much artistry is involved in writing anything that takes its material from “fact.” The same issue is of primary importance in the genre of nonfiction which has long distinguished itself from other forms of literature because of its ties to the external world.

Daniel Lehman in *Matters of Fact: Reading Nonfiction Over the Edge* proposes that nonfiction “implicates” reader, writer, and text, referring to the complex relationship that arises from the fact that a person, place, or event named in a piece of nonfiction has material existence outside the page (3). Lehman cites various examples, like our different reactions to reading about the horrific death of a character in fiction, and the same kind of death reported in the newspaper. I couldn’t agree more that my experience of watching *Magandang Gabi Bayan* Halloween specials is partly shaped by the perception that despite the badly done horror effects, this is a reenactment

of a “real” person’s experience, in a “real” dormitory, with a “real” ghost. *This*, more than the actor’s credible portrayal of the haunted figure, and *despite* the awful ghost makeup, terrifies me.

Although Lehman uses this idea to insist on the difference between fiction and nonfiction, some of its implications apply to both. As Lehman himself points out, the “lure of the narrative [which comes from] direct or indirect knowledge of the events and people on which the narrative is based” is not exclusive to nonfiction (3). He says:

Certainly such considerations are never foreign to many forms of realistic fiction which depend on mimetic communication to create possible worlds that interplay with actual worlds. And that outside engagement in fictional texts will become more “thick” or complicated by outside experience if the events are widely known or if the reader has a direct, material interest in those events. (3)

It is a unique space that Lehman describes and which somehow corresponds to the space that autobiographical fiction occupies—this hybrid genre whose interest does not lie in the use of widely known or verifiable data as in nonfiction, but whose reader, in some circumstances, and whose writer *always* feels the same sense of “implication” that Lehman describes.

As reader, I would use the word “compromised” along with Lehman’s “implicated” to describe our unique relationship to any work which, as far as we know, has such direct links to the “outside world.” That we can hardly divorce the text from reality means also that we can’t read “purely” or “objectively” as we ideally would other kinds of fiction.

This should not be a big a problem for the fiction writer who makes no claim to tell the “truth” in the factual sense, and who can simply deny any connection between her work with real people or events. In the case of the writer who uses autobiographical material, then surely there would be some problems with mothers, old lovers, or current enemies who may be used as characters in fiction, and who might recognize themselves on the page. In fact, facing the possible wrath or disappointment of family and friends might be the first and most important mental hurdle a writer who uses

autobiographical material has to overcome. As writer Lucy Ellman discovered after publishing her own autobiographical novel *Sweet Desserts*, “even the most liberal-minded do not wish to be written about” (127) In fact, she says, “almost *no one* wants to be written about” (127). But apart from this small circle of directly involved people, it seems the height of paranoia, not to mention, narcissism, to think that anyone else would care. As a writer in the Philippines, however, I believe that our circumstances are special, Filipinos being who they are, and the Filipino literary community being the close-knit little family that it is. University-bred, workshop-oriented, and Manila-based are terms which seem to define the members of this family who are constantly running into each other as they work or study or simply gravitate towards the same schools, publish in the same magazines, and join the same contests. In short, we all know each other, and not necessarily in our professional capacities. As proof, all twelve of my child’s godparents are writers. This isn’t necessarily important if the “reader” in Lehman’s quote who gets “implicated” by the materiality of the text were referring to millions of other readers who move beyond this tiny circle of influence, who would not know or could not care less if a story is about the author’s “real” heartbreak or the writer’s “real” apprehensions about marriage or motherhood. It is a romantic idea to release a story to the Great Beyond, but more likely, a Filipino writer would be passing around a copy of her Free Press story to her friends and family, and surely, there is a kind of “implicated” situation there, too. I would be the first to confess guilt. In a workshop class, I would do my best to play along with the idea that the author is dead although she happens to be breathing beside me, and happens to have lunch with me some days. But the fact that her character’s description sounds suspiciously like her husband whom I happen to be friends with, too, takes the story to a different plane altogether. The “real world” looms larger than it should, sometimes overpowering/subsuming the fiction.

What makes this more significant is that the institutions from which Filipino writers generate feedback in the form of awards, publication, and the aforementioned workshops are largely “implicated” as well. The bulk of sales of a writer’s first collection constitutes this circle of the “implicated.” This basic reality must surely impact the work to some degree especially if a writer chooses to write about herself. Some questions that easily come to mind are: Do we, in fact, have all the artistic freedom we need to write

the stories we'd like to write, in the way we want to write them, given how involved our readers might be without material? How might their "direct or indirect knowledge" of the events we describe, in the case of autobiographical material, affect their perception of our work?

But putting the reader aside, the same problem of "implication" still holds. If writers of nonfiction are wary of taking too many artistic liberties, I think the common apprehension of writers of autobiographical fiction is that they cannot take enough. It is, to Kilian, the dilemma of a servant who insists on serving two masters, who finds that "the facts of the matter may not suit the demands of fiction, and fiction may corrupt the validity of the facts."

This leads us back to the pervasive notion of the purity of art, and how this can only be marred by "extratextual" considerations. This has always been the primary case against nonfiction, and yet the same conflict lies at the heart of using autobiographical material in fiction.

It is an anxiety that the writers discussed in Nalbantian's study share, they who were "shunning the vestiges of lyrical Romanticism," "the presence of the ever-powerful 'I'" even as they were experimenting with a form that took them closer to themselves—their own haunted pasts, their own secret obsessions (45). They wished to be rid of the subjectivity which they believed limited or cramped art, and their response to the problem was one that required a complete separation between the person who lives and the writer who creates (45). Nalbantian says that the poet Rimbaud was ahead of his time when he said that "the poet, in seeking for his quintessential self which he would use in his writing as the 'the other' the arduous task of draining away all the 'poisons' of egotism" (Nalbantian 46). Years later Woolf would echo this sentiment, struggling with the form of autobiographical fiction even as she refused to indulge in the wiles of "the damned egotistical self" (qtd in Nalbantian 46). Joyce, in *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, creates an image of the detached artist who is "within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (qtd in Nalbantian 46). Finally, a similar sentiment is expressed by T.S. Eliot when he proclaimed that: "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its materials" (qtd in Nalbantian 45).

It is right that Eliot should describe this as the ideal, the perfect version of the artist, for nothing seems harder to achieve. It requires that the author live a dual existence, each completely unknown to the other. Even more important, the values of these two persons appear contradictory, the traditional notions of the artist as a sensitive, feeling, compassionate human being, clashing with the notion of artist as a cold and calculating craftsman.

Such separation is easier said than done. Bonnie Friedman recounts her struggle with autobiographical material and touches on the “implicated” writer’s difficulty. She draws a comparison between the artist utilizing the potency of personal material to that of Frankenstein doggedly pursuing his goal to create life, sacrificing family, rejecting social taboo, even losing his sense of humanity, only to be horrified and then destroyed, along with everything he loves, by the monster he has created (48). The writer, weaving a story based on personal material is no different in her stubborn, if temporary indifference to all her ‘human’ concerns. The only question is what sort of monster waits at the end of the pursuit.

Hilary Mantel says about the fictional process as a whole that:

...it is a cannibalistic process. That it can bring order, and beauty and pity to the world I do not deny. But I am myself more conscious of my methods than my effects, and I do not always admire my methods. I have sat, at the moment of purest heartbreak, in mental agony, and put my thoughts on paper, and then I have taken those thoughts and allocated them to one of my characters largely for comic effect. On the whole I would guess that writers are ruthless people, though their saving grace is that they are ruthless with themselves. (43)

Perhaps this is why autobiographical material can cause such conflict in the writer, because nowhere else is she more keenly aware of this sense of duality, this separation of person from artist, and the consequent ‘ruthlessness.’ It is a denial of our human connections and responsibilities, or a subsuming of it under the artistic goal. It is easy to break under the strain. Friedman, in the course of writing about the haunting figure of a sister whose illness shaped her family’s life, ended up with a different story that did not directly



touch on those issues she had wanted so desperately to resolve in fiction. She came up with a 'safer' story, one that was artistically satisfactory, but wonders still what would have happened if she had pursued the story where the real demons lay (55).

Writer Margot Livesey talks about her own insecurity in writing about the looming figure of her dead stepmother. She says: "... I lacked the confidence in my ability to transform and there were too many suitcases of truth that I wanted to smuggle into the story. I would never have got them all onto the planet of fiction" (83).

Because she would not take liberties with this person's life, Livesey wrote two separate narratives, one she calls fiction, the other she calls anti-fiction. The difference lies in how she controlled the way each would be perceived by readers through textual cues: one was to be taken as a story where "we do not feel we are reading about the real world but rather that the wings of symmetry were unfolding around us" (73). The other she wrote like an essay with the intention of veracity (73). The creation of the anti-fiction version Livesey used to address the insecurities, hesitations, the scruples that her fiction would not accommodate, demonstrating how, when we cannot fully distance ourselves, or achieve Joyce's disinterested stance which the writing of fiction requires, then it may be best to turn to other methods of representation.

Of course all this angst, this strong sense of being "implicated" may seem true only of certain writers of certain temperaments, or towards subject matters of particular personal magnitude. Autobiographical writing doesn't always have to be a soul-wrenching experience as evidenced by Lucy Ellman's lighthearted account of writing her prizewinning first novel *Sweet Desserts*. Ellman downplays the problems of working with true-to-life material, saying that naming characters (presumably those she was taking from real life) was "embarrassing—it's such a clear confrontation with make-believe, it's so hard to know if you've got the name right" (128), and of plotting "silly... interfere[ing] with the serious confessional mode" (128). Her humorous account ends with her declaring how she hates being interviewed because she doesn't like being written about, not for issues of privacy but because of reporters taking over "[her] material" which is herself (129). Ellman does

reveal, however, in the course of this essay how her family had felt betrayed by her book, and so one wonders if her “healthy attitude” isn’t one more facade a writer has to put up after the writing is done, and perhaps the damage, as well.

As for myself, I have found all these problems in using autobiographical material and more. I’ve felt some uneasiness creep in when I decided to kill off both my brothers for the sake of a tighter story; some guilt over exposing my very private other half to a bunch of strangers (whom I fear would probably view him through my narrow characterization only); the constant anxiety that my mother would discover how I had simplified for a laugh, more than once, her complicated but constant love; and perhaps the loneliest reason of all, getting some applause, and a little money, for a story that does my father’s brief life no justice at all.

But I have found other things too in the use of autobiographical material, and as long as they are enough to balance off the bad parts, or until I’m bored witless with myself, then perhaps I’ll continue writing stories in this mode. My scruples would not allow me to be too honest, but I would like to believe that what I know of fiction now and its strategies has thus far spared me from too many moral dilemmas. I am testing fiction; I’m finding out what I can make it do, and what I will allow myself to do with it. So far, I have been awed by fiction’s capacity not only to reveal but to conceal, so that when memory is a burden, and emotion overwhelming, I have come to rely on simple matters like point of view, or the brevity of a scene, the rhythm of the prose to cut or trim the edges where there is too much of myself. Apart from my discovery of autobiographical material as potent material, I am equally drawn to fiction’s power to render experience malleable, and the whole mess of life itself manageable. I knew this as much as the next person even as an undergraduate who thought my life too ordinary to be written about, (and so wrote about rock stars instead), but nothing quite convinces you about the truth of anything unless you’ve gone through it, and incidentally, this is best reason I can give for why I would choose to write autobiographically, and why I would use fiction to do it. I trust them both and equally.

Annie Dillard says that the writing subsumes memory, therefore if we wish to preserve anything we should not write about it at all. But I feel that fiction allows us to preserve as well, in a different way. It keeps sacred things sacred, because it allows us to hold back what is most important, give only what we will or what we can. I am aware that in writing about my mother I am fully “implicated” as Lehman suggests, but it’s not a situation I find I wish to escape just now. It gives my stories boundaries, both social and moral ones. And strangely enough these are boundaries that fiction itself, its elements and strategies, seem to help me maintain. And this is what I want to do for my own experience anyway: I only wish to tame it, control it, give it some shape, ideally enough to fit a page or maybe ten.

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