



Achieving form in autobiography

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Dates:

Received: 30 July 2014

Accepted: 29 Oct. 2014

Published: 15 Dec. 2014

How to cite this article:

 Meihuizen, N., 2014,
'Achieving form in
autobiography', *Literator*
35(2), Art. #1143, 7 pages.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/lit.v35i2.1143>
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This article argues that, unlike biographies which tend to follow patterns based on conventional expectations, salient autobiographies achieve forms unique to themselves. The article draws on ideas from contemporary formalists such as Peter McDonald and Angela Leighton but also considers ideas on significant form stemming from earlier writers and critics such as P.N. Furbank and Willa Cather. In extracting from these writers the elements of what they consider comprise achieved form, the article does not seek to provide a rigid means of objectively testing the formal attributes of a piece of writing. It rather offers qualitative reminders of the need to be alert to the importance of form, even if the precise nature of this importance is not possible to define. Form is involved in meaning, and this continuously opens up possibilities regarding the reader's relationship with the work in question. French genetic critic Debray Genette distinguishes between 'semantic effect' (the direct telling involved in writing) and 'semiological effect' (the indirect signification involved). It is the latter, the article argues in summation, which gives a work its singular nature, producing a form that is not predictable but suggestive, imaginative.

Die bereik van vorm in outobiografie. In hierdie artikel word geargumenteer dat prominente outobiografieë vormlike eienskappe ontwikkel wat uniek is aan hulself, anders as biografieë wat gewoonlik patrone gebaseer op konvensionele verwagtinge navolg. Die artikel maak gebruik van idees van kontemporêre formaliste soos Peter McDonald, maar oorweeg ook sienings oor betekenisvolle vormgewing uit die werk van vroeëre skrywers en kritici soos P.N. Furbank en Willa Cather. Hoewel elemente uitgelig word wat hierdie skrywers as grondliggend aan die daarstelling van afgeronde vorm beskou, is dit nie die bedoeling om 'n rigiede werkswyse waaraan die vormlike kenmerke van 'n teks getoets kan word, aan die hand te doen nie. Die bedoeling is eerder 'n appèl om vanuit 'n kwalitatiewe vertrekpunt ingestel te wees op die belang van die vormlike, selfs al kan die presiese aard hiervan nie altyd omskryf word nie. Vorm is deel van betekenis, en hierdie gegewe skep voortdurend nuwe moontlikhede vir die leser se verhouding met die spesifieke werk. Debray Genette, beoefenaar van die Franse genetiese kritiek, onderskei tussen 'semantiese effek' (dit wat direk gesê word in die skryfwerk) en 'semiologiese effek' (die indirekte be-tekening). Die slotsom waartoe die artikel kom, is dat dit laasgenoemde is wat aan 'n werk 'n eiesoortige aard gee en vorm tot stand bring wat nie voorspelbaar is nie, maar eerder suggestief en verbeeldingryk.

Introduction: McDonald and Leighton on form

It is my contention that significant autobiographies achieve significant forms, never static in their potential or reception, yet peculiar to themselves alone. Peter McDonald, in a consideration of 'remorse' in Yeats, offers an important insight about the factual nature of literary form, which leads to the issue of formal significance:

In reading Yeats, the poetry's complex relations with facts, whether these are facts of the poet's private life or of the life of his times, are always critically relevant. Acknowledging this, and acknowledging the difficulty of understanding these relations with the necessary fullness, it is vital to add that the poetry itself is another fact in the matter, and that it too demands respect. (McDonald 2002:49)

If the 'poetry itself is another fact in the matter' along with those facts of 'the poet's private life' and 'the life of his times', the form of the writerly expression becomes as significant as the themes presented. The distinction between thematic material and the expression thereof can be viewed in various ways, ranging from the new critics' intermeshing of form and content to Emmanuel Levinas's ([1974] 1997:5–7, 44–49) distinction between the 'saying' and the 'said' where (in basic terms) formed expression (the 'said') is always open to reinterpretation, is never finalised (the 'saying'). Susan Wolfson (1997:1–30), in her seminal book *Formal charges*, discusses in fairly exhaustive fashion the critical approaches to this distinction. She is led to conclude, however, that, though prose in comparison to poetry 'involves form', 'the modalities – macro-structures of plot or argument, medial structuring in paragraphs, local syntaxes and verbal patterns – do not confer the kind of discursive identity inscribed by poetic forms' (*ibid*:3). Whilst this is undoubtedly true, I

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argue that autobiographical prose can be as singular in its form as poetry. Prose, though it is not as 'precisely and inescapably defined by its formed language and its formal commitments' as poetry, is yet made distinctive by its various authors. This happens not through its unique accounts of various lives (which have their own particular thematic strands) but because of the way these lives are given substance through the writing. The resultant work has a formal significance peculiar to itself, differing from discursive prose, historical prose or fiction though it might contain elements of all of these.

As McDonald (2002:49) also points out, the writing's 'complex relations with facts', private and general, needs to be considered. Overlooking the complexity of these relationships, which must include autobiographical elements (the poet's own response to the facts of his or her 'private life or of the life of his times'), leads to generalisations or convenient simplifications – convenient, at least, from an antagonistically sectarian point of view. In this regard, McDonald (2002:53) takes a passage from Marjorie Howes's *Yeats's Nations* and criticises 'the prevailing habit of seeing ideological sermons in the stones of poetic constructions':

One recent study, for example, speaks of how 'Yeats's Anglo-Irish nationality ... deliberately and elaborately exposes itself as a construction', and notes how 'the original vitality of the house also contains an original impulse towards crisis and disintegration'. But the theoretical import of the metaphor here is false to its literal source: houses don't (or shouldn't) have impulses towards disintegration, and the views of a property surveyor on the matter might properly command more confidence than those of a literary critic. (McDonald 2002:53)

What McDonald does in this instance is, precisely, to consider 'the poetry's complex relations with facts' 'with the necessary fullness' (McDonald 2002:49) to disentangle critical imposition from poetic fact by the exposure of the critic's flawed metaphor. That is, the conflation of Yeats's 'nationality' with a 'construction', the Great House that contains its own seed of destruction, is a post-facto ideological reading, neatly revealed through a *formal* error, a metaphor 'false to its literal source'.

If literary form bears a factual significance that needs to be taken into account, McDonald (2002:49) is able to see the relationship between a theme, in this case 'remorse', and the expressions of that theme in material terms (diction, figuration and patterning within the work). Furthermore, in taking the 'measure' of this relationship, he is able '... to insist on form as something other than accidental or narrowly functional in literature and in literary meaning' (McDonald 2002:49). Angela Leighton (2008:19) reinforces the sense of purposeful form when she quotes from Susanne K. Langer's 1953 book, *Feeling and form*. She explains:

Forms are either empty abstractions, or they do have a content; and artistic forms have a very special one, namely their *import*. They are logically expressive, or significant, forms. (Leighton 2008:19)

Formal elements have meaning. Furthermore, these formal elements are 'facts' in their own right. We think of Auden's

(2007:246) widely quoted 'poetry makes nothing happen' with its (often) simplistically received sense of the sealed-off and impotent poetic work. However, Leighton argues (situating her understanding of poetry's 'nothing' within a brief evocation of the history of *l'art pour l'art*) that this 'nothing' which poetry makes 'happen' is a highly 'significant' element in itself:

To acknowledge the 'nothing' at the heart of the literary is a way of starting to ask what the work knows, and therefore of seeking to modify the very terms of knowing. (Leighton 2008:35)

The work itself is an agent of 'knowingness', of active participation in knowledge generation and not simply a passively constituted record of attained knowledge. Leighton (2008) continues:

This is not the same as saying that ideological readings are irrelevant. It is rather to suggest that something constantly pulls against relevance, and reference. However it is described, form, style, beauty, music, it consists of finding what is 'for nothing' in the text. (p. 35)

Not narrowly functional, even anti-functional, in a strictly rationalist sense, these elements are vital purveyors of significance. They promote 'play' (which is 'not totally free play' as it 'remains connected with ethical and political values' (Leighton 2008:36) and thus participate in our interaction with the world. However, importantly, they enable a judicious perspective. The implication is that the play of these elements is not 'normatively identical' with the ethical and political values of daily life to the point where 'the one can be bedrocked into the other' (Leighton 2008:36). Distance, perspective, is achieved (Leighton 2008:35–36): 'Literature, perhaps, is the point where the two meet, their hub and hold-off.' Because of this perspective, a sense of something greater than the sum of the parts is always in evidence, and it is this sense that gives form its continuing significance. Again, Levinas ([1974] 1997:85) might be evoked if we think of the continual 'saying' involved in art, compared to the 'said' of functional discourse or a mere portrayal of facts. This something *more* that is greater than the sum of the parts can also be related to Levinasian alterity, the otherness which is never circumscribed by the said, which bears a fundamental relationship with the saying.

If the 'nothing' that 'happens' involves a suggestive formal depiction of thematic materials, we appreciate all the more the work itself as a 'factually' existing object with its own imperatives. The formal distinctiveness of the work allows us to see it as being 'connected with ethical and political values' from the realm of facts and, at the same time, as being *other*, as not being 'normatively identical with those values' (Leighton 2008:36). This indicates one way of how we might insist that form is not 'accidental or narrowly functional' (McDonald 2002:49). Leighton's observation also sheds light on the truth-function of autobiography. If the events of a life recorded in writing offer a point where writing and life meet, forever (and inevitably) maintaining a distinction, a distance between the two, this fact is of importance when we come to the third point that McDonald makes.



It is one taken from Geoffrey Hill (1984) and concerns the:

... return upon the self' involved in serious writing, the 'transformation of mere reflex' into an 'act of attention', a 'disinterested concentration of purpose' upon one's own preconceived notions, prejudices, self-contradictions and errors. (p. 249)

The 'disinterested' 'return upon the self' pertains to the rigorous, objectively distanced quality of the self-scrutiny involved in writing, which McDonald (2002:249) sees as reflected, for instance, in being able to 'take the measure' of a theme, figured in an aspect of the self – in the case of his example, the reference to 'remorse' expressed in Yeats's (1950:265) 'A dialogue of self and soul'. The 'act of attention' and 'concentration of purpose' imply a resultant crafted structure, a specific 'form', as distinct from the loose flux stemming from 'mere reflex', 'preconceived notions, prejudices, self-contradictions and errors'. Autobiography (of which some of Yeats's poetry is exemplary – certainly that dealing with remorse), because of its consciously reflexive nature, is doubly receptive to the value of the focused 'return upon the self', and the best autobiographies must exhibit the fruits of the 'transformation of mere reflex' into the 'act of attention' that results in the 'disinterested concentration of purpose' reflected in formal achievement.

Furbank and 'finding a form'

The discovery of unique form in autobiography is the gist of a still pertinent review by P.N. Furbank, published in *The London Review of Books* in 1986. The review is of Brian Finney's *The inner I: British literary autobiography of the 20th century* (1985). Furbank (1986:10) poses the importance of 'value-judgments' in the type of writing which is able to 'find a form'. He disagrees with the by now commonplace view taken by Finney that the autobiographer deliberately gives himself or herself away in the course of writing, making the work 'require for its completion' an 'active collaboration' on the part of the reader, which involves 'the spotting of blind spots and fissures and the following-out of inadvertently-dropped clues, as a way of access to the "sub-text"'. Bypassing the long list of issues linked to the question of 'veracity in autobiography', Furbank argues that the fictive aspect of autobiography, the fact that it is a construction based on relative perceptions of truth, 'is not a problem peculiar to autobiography but a general human one'. He goes on to say that '... for autobiography it is not a "problem" at all but rather the condition of its existence'. As Gary Hagberg (2008) lucidly points out in his book, *Describing ourselves: Wittgenstein and autobiographical consciousness*:

... our relation to our past is no more passive than is our relation to what we presently visually perceive: we are not the containers of memory-images that a true narrative would accurately describe. Rather, we are in a continual process of reconsideration. (p. 236)

'Reconsideration' for Hagberg (2008) involves:

... reflective restructuring, and ... repositioning the actions, events, occurrences, interactions, efforts, aspirations, achievements,

intentions – in short, our words, deeds, and everything in between that, taken together, form the teleological trajectories, the narrative threads, of our selves. (p. 236)

This process of reconsideration is never complete, and so the 'content' of our 'self-investigation' is always 'dynamic':

Such a developmental retrospective is never finally settled beyond the reach of re juxtaposition with other related (and in some cases seemingly unrelated) life-events; such retrospective self-understanding is the result of an *active* labor of self-investigation, the content of which is dynamic, not static. (Hagberg 2008:236)

If the 'content' of 'self-investigation' is 'dynamic', then the logical grounds for seeking out 'blind spots and fissures' in autobiography in order to discover a firmly embedded 'sub-text' are shaky. This is not to say that the idea of truth can be disregarded as it is, according to Furbank, in Ford Madox Ford's autobiographies. Furbank (1986:10) feels that Conrad and Yeats '... placed a high value on truth, and that, to my mind, is all one has the right to ask'. Even if this truth is finally impossible to convey in any factually satisfying sense, what is important is the 'sincerity' behind the impulse. Furbank (1986:10) contrasts 'the faked lyricism and bogus "life-affirming" message' of Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie* (1959), with Conrad's sincere 'sobriety'. Conrad (2005), for instance, wrote in his *A personal record*:

Even before the most seductive reveries I have remained mindful of that sobriety of interior life, that asceticism of sentiment, in which alone the naked form of truth, such as one conceives it, such as one feels it, can be rendered without shame ... I have tried to be a sober worker all my life – all my two lives. (p. 290)

Having just quoted this passage, which places emphasis on the value of the 'sobriety of interior life' and the 'asceticism of intellect' – both of which imply the finely tuned disinterestedness of the self-scrutiniser – Furbank (1986:10) raises the issue of value-judgements: 'Judgements about "truth" in this context are, or ought to be, value-judgements, rather than merely factual ones.'

Authorial intentionality

An issue that emerges here, then, is that of the *value* of authorial 'sincerity', long since considered by W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley, and returned to in the 1980s by J.M. Coetzee. Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946:476) noted that it would be 'convenient' if the term 'sincerity' could be equated with an objective analytical term, but it cannot. In other words, the term is at the mercy of a subjectivism that is based on a reader's supposed understanding of authorial intention. Coetzee (1984) carries the critique further when he imagines Dostoevsky's response (based on the Russian's actual objections) to the type of sincerity Rousseau felt he had achieved:

To hope to attain the truth of one's life-story by self-interrogation merely lands one in an endless regression, since *any* position one settles on as the truth, however unkind it may be, can be subjected to sceptical questioning. For example: 'But am I not lying to myself? Am I not making myself out to be worse



than I am in order to make myself feel good about my ruthless honesty? (p. 4)

From this point of view, Conrad's appeal to his own 'sobriety' and 'asceticism of sentiment' can be seen as part of the 'endless regression' associated with perceived 'sincerity'. How 'disinterested' is such writing, in fact? Furbank, however, unlike Wimsatt and Beardsley and Coetzee, whilst not questioning the veracity of Conrad's self-appraisal (partly by assuming the 'dynamic' nature of the content of self-interrogation in relation to being-in-the-world), points to an economy of formal substance whereby the shortcomings associated with authorial intentionality and subjectivism are, at least, suspended. Referring to both *A personal record* and Yeats's (1916) *Reveries over childhood and youth*, he focuses on the reader's present awareness of the *quality* of what is before him, 'on the page':

What matters is what is creatively happening here and now, and from moment to moment, on the page – which is another way of saying that their books are real writing, indeed great writing. Of course the achievement would not take place were there not a genuine traffic between the writer's present self and his earlier one, but the finding of meaning and value must essentially belong to the present ... The success of these ... autobiographies is a matter of their having found their own form. (Furbank 1986:11)

We are still left with the problem raised by Wimsatt and Beardsley: Are 'meaning and value' not relative terms, based on the reader's perceived relation to authorial intention?

It is as well, at this stage, to explore their objection a little further as my gauging of the value of autobiographical works is premised on a belief in authorial intention. Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946:469) in particular and the new critics in general were notable in their underscoring of the intentional fallacy, a notion which, in their view, did not exclude the individual input of the author but which did claim the subsequent autonomy of the work of art:

A poem can *be* only through its *meaning* – since its medium is words – yet it *is*, simply *is*, in the sense that we have no excuse for inquiring what part is intended or meant. (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1946:469)

In recent years, the school of deconstruction has raised the intentional fallacy to the next power by questioning the very possibility of individual authorship. This notion is not without its critics. Textual scholar Peter Shillingsburg (2006), for one, summarises the deconstructive project in a sceptical way:

... deconstruction focuses primarily on the ways social pressures, the slipperiness of language itself, and a writer's unconscious assumptions subvert or extend or even contradict the ostensible surface meaning of what is written. (p. 52)

As a corrective, he brings practical experience in editing to bear on deconstruction's side-lining of the author:

... my assumptions about authors begin with the notion that writers are frequently very aware of and are master

manipulators of that which they do *not* say, as well as what they do. (Shillingsburg 2006:52)

His practical focus is centred on his extensive editing experience, which introduces an element of informed empirical observation based on immersive practice in textual variants and manuscripts. It is also true, however, that Raymonde Debray Genette (Genette 2004:72), a French genetic critic working on Flaubert, sees manuscripts of prose works as being even less revealing of an author's intentions than finished works. I point out, though, that the 'exact incertitude' she in the end perceives after studying the manuscript variants of 'A simple heart' (Genette 2004:93) from my point of view in fact underlines intentionality, as the final sense of 'incertitude' is what Flaubert desired.

It is clear, then, that whatever one's 'assumptions' may be, the whole matter of authorial intention is not straightforward. As classics scholar Joseph Farrell (2005:98) remarks, 'Authorial intention remains an unsolved problem in literary studies.' Farrell (2005:108), focusing on a demarcated area that can be tested in terms of given data, at least, that of allusion, sees both intentionality and non-intentionality at work in texts that rely on allusion, and this seems common-sensical. He sees '... the process of assessing these allusions as unfolding according to a procedure that the author sets in motion, but that he cannot fully control'. To apply Farrell's view in general terms, the author is a focal medium whose intentionality gathers to the page various materials, some of whose provenance is unknown and whose consequences are unforeseen. Nevertheless, from this perspective what does not seem to be in contention is that even if a specific act of writing is underlain by an interrelating universe of texts, authorial intention is yet present.

The author might not be the autonomous agent once taken for granted by the reader, but his or her work bears a complex relation to the facts of experience and is valued, for instance, for the disinterested quality of its diction and patterning, its respect for the formal elements that provide it with its own unique shape. These elements depend on writerly discipline, a type of strenuousness, to use Furbank's term, at odds with the potentially *laissez-aller* concept of the 'death-of-the-author'.

Furbank and the singular autobiography

According to Furbank, the 'supreme example' of a work that 'found [*its*] own form' is Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1979), '... in which memory is downgraded in favour of those present visitings of the imagination which actualise what, in the past, has been only potential experience'. Present form is able to substantiate unformed potential from the past. The writer's constructive powers are aided by 'present visitings of the imagination', and it is perhaps these 'visitings' – not circumscribed by rules of composition, one would think – that inform the singular work.



In elaborating on this singular nature, Furbank (1986) first distinguishes between biography (with its various generic constraints) and autobiography:

A biographer, like an architect, has to provide certain basic utilities – in the one case doors and windows and a heating-system, in the other chronology, genealogy and some documentation. For the autobiographer, on the other hand, there is no such clause in his contract, though – which is a different matter – he may be subject to certain codes of behaviour, may have an obligation towards ‘truth’ in some sense or other of that word. (p. 10)

He concludes that autobiography and biography are ‘... very dissimilar genres; and as a corollary, autobiographies, or anyway the best autobiographies, tend to be very different from one another’. Conrad’s *A personal record* offers him an example of a singular autobiography as ‘... no other work remotely resembles’ it. He applauds.

... the passion for relevance displayed by Conrad in a book which, with all its dizzying zig-zags, geographical and chronological, contains not a sentence that isn’t strictly related to its theme. The same amazing constructive force is at work as in *Nostromo*: a most intricate form is produced, alive in every part. (Furbank 1986:10)

Conrad’s perceived ‘passion for relevance’, to the extent that his autobiography ‘contains not a sentence that isn’t strictly related to the theme’, might seem an overstatement of the case, but a careful scrutiny of the book will prove that this is not so. Furbank’s awareness of the same ‘constructive force’ evident in the work as one would find in the creation of fiction, productive of an ‘intricacy of form’ that is ‘alive in every part’, also seems a valid observation to me. What is being described here in relationship to the singular autobiography is something very like a Coleridgean organic form. To claim this much for a literary work in post-New Critical times (let alone post-Poststructural times) is perhaps to take a reactionary stance, but in my view, the notion of organic form is not merely a subjective imposition after the fact if the elements of thematic relevance, constructive force, formal intricacy and the performative potential of the words on the page can be tested by the careful reader.

Furbank (1986:11) finishes his review by looking at a writer who, according to his understanding, lacks form. Though Edwin Muir’s *Autobiography* ‘... is a book with a following, and is certainly not a negligible work’, it ‘... has not had the courage to achieve a form. For much of the time it imitates a biography; at moments, again, it apes a novel’. It is blighted, that is, because it is seen to display the determining features of other genres in an unthinking way. And then, as if Furbank wishes to illustrate the grounds for this lack of ‘courage’, Muir ([1954] 1990:165) is shown to write of one of his own poems as a ‘trifling result’ in relation to the powerful waking dream which prompted it. ‘What’, asks Furbank, ‘could there conceivably be more valuable than a poem?’ Writing a poem requires all the effort implicit in what Geoffrey Hill (1984:155) describes as the disinterested ‘transformation of mere reflex’ into an ‘act of attention’ that achieves a particular form. This fact leads to Furbank’s final pronouncement: ‘What, indeed, could be more valuable than

an autobiography, if undertaken with the strenuousness proper to art?’ Whether Muir’s writing lacks strenuousness because of his stated attitude to it is open to debate Whether Conrad and Yeats’s works are free of novelistic features is unlikely. Both these observations reveal, perhaps, a prejudice on Furbank’s part. His evaluation of Muir might thus be flawed, but the spirit in which he writes underlines the importance of uniquely achieved form. In contradistinction to Furbank, however, I would argue that the sense of achieved form is not diminished by novelistic elements or other importations (as it were) from various genres. The skilled autobiography absorbs these elements for its own purposes but in the proper proportion and never without cause.

Much in Furbank nevertheless seems useful: his emphasis on ‘value-judgements’ as opposed to judgements of fact; his acknowledgement of the self-evident nature of relative perceptions of truth and the subsequent emphasis, rather, on the veracity inherent in sincere intention; and his awareness of the formal uniqueness of each work. Also useful are his perceptions concerning organicism, that every element in the work is relevant, down to the level of each individual sentence. He also points out that a constructive force is present, as found in the best creative writing, which makes the work ‘alive in every part’. His idea that the ‘present visitings of the imagination’ that work on the experiences of the past are much more important than a factual recollection of that past underlines the ‘dynamic’ element in autobiography (to borrow a term from Hagberg), as does his perception that the quality of the writing is governed by ‘... what is creatively happening here and now, and from moment to moment, on the page’. Finally, his emphasis on the courage involved in finding a singular form and undertaking this task with the ‘strenuousness proper to art’ is bracing. These criteria, together with McDonald’s (which stress, again, the writing’s complex relationships to facts, the literary form itself as fact, the quality of diction and patterning within the work and the disinterested self-scrutiny involved), are not meant to provide a rigid means of objectively testing the nature of a piece of writing but are rather qualitative reminders of the need to be alert to the importance of form, even if it is not possible to define the precise nature of this importance.

Willa Cather on form

Willa Cather’s ideas, in her book *On writing* (originally published in 1949), complement the above points. She (Cather [1949] 1962:9) relates the working of the imagination to writerly discipline, which she champions in the face of ‘... the general tendency ... to force things up’. Her emphasis is on ‘mood’ – all else in a book emerges from the prevailing mood created. Although she deals with a specific type of writing in these instances, of which her *Death comes for the archbishop* is an example (writing ‘in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment’), her paradoxical understanding that ‘discipline’ does not require one to artificially force the material ties in with Furbank’s sense of strenuousness, which is underlain by the type of ‘sincerity’ that, for example, avoids dramatically inspired ‘faked lyricism’ and ‘bogus life affirming messages’. In the



writing of poetry she deals, like Furbank, with the uniqueness of the work: 'No fine poet can ever write like another. His poetry is simply his individuality' (Cather [1949] 1962:28). She also has thoughts on the relevance of details when writing of Tolstoy in comparison with Balzac:

... there is this determining difference: the clothes, the dishes, the haunting interiors of those old Moscow houses, are always so much a part of the emotions of the people that they are perfectly synthesized. (Cather [1949] 1962:39–40)

Furbank's perception of 'disinterested wonderment' in Yeats's *Reveries* finds a correlative in Cather's valuation of 'mood'. She writes of Hawthorn's *Scarlet letter*:

The material investiture of the story is presented as if unconsciously; by the reserved, fastidious hand of an artist, not by the gaudy fingers of a showman or the mechanical industry of a department-store window-dresser. As I remember it, in the twilight melancholy of that book, in its consistent mood, one can scarcely see the actual surroundings of the people, one feels them, rather, in the dusk. (Cather [1949] 1962:41)

Is there a link between the powerful 'mood' evoked by an author, and one's ability to 'feel' what is presented? I believe that this is the case with Conrad and Yeats. Whilst mood and feeling cannot be quantified, the careful reader will surely register them. Yeats's pervasive mood of 'disinterested wonderment' creates the 'dream-like' quality of his *Reveries*, felt, but hard to define.

In writing of Sarah Orne Jewett, Cather ([1949] 1962:48) distinguishes between merely 'good' writing and 'Literature'. The 'process' involved in writing the latter also cannot be defined, '... but certainly persistence, survival, recurrence in the writer's mind, are highly characteristic of it'. What emerges from writing subjected to these forces are 'shapes and scenes' that '... at last get themselves rightly put down'. 'At last' gestures towards the strenuous discipline involved to reach this point whilst 'get themselves rightly put down' points to their objectively distanced, disinterested (from the point of view of the author) emergence. Their value is indicated in the following: They '... make a very much higher order of writing, and much more costly, than the most vivid and vigorous transfer of immediate impressions', an idea linked to Furbank's Wordsworthian perception of present imagination that is actualising potential past experience. What is interesting in Jewett's case is that Cather ([1949] 1962:48–9) can trace over an extended period the development in Jewett from 'immediate impressions' to what '... later crystallized into the almost flawless examples of literary art', a kind of test case for emotion recollected in tranquillity:

One can, as it were, watch in process the two kinds of making: the first, which is full of perception and feeling but rather fluid and formless; the second, which is tightly built and significant in design. The design is, indeed, so happy, so right, that it seems inevitable; the design is the story, and the story is the design. (Cather 1962:49)

The quote above represents another expression of the synthesis of form and content in the successful art-work. Her final

clause relates, again, to Furbank's perception regarding the 'relevance' of every aspect of the writing and that 'constructive force' which produces 'intricate form', 'alive in every part'.

Cather's ([1949] 1962) conflation of form and content enables her, too, to sense the presence of the life-force in the writing:

The 'Pointed fir' sketches are living things caught in the open, with light and freedom and air-spaces about them. They melt into the land and the life of the land until they are not stories at all, but life itself. (pp. 49–50)

This largely intuitive tracing of quality is centred in the subjective responses of the reader. The story, Cather ([1949] 1962) argues:

... must leave in the mind of the sensitive reader an intangible residuum of pleasure; a cadence, a quality of voice that is exclusively the writer's own, individual, unique. A quality that one can remember without the volume at hand, can experience over and over again in the mind but can never absolutely define, as one can experience in memory a melody, or the summer perfume of a garden. (p. 50)

She expresses, to my mind, the singularity of the work which achieves its form: '... a cadence, a quality of voice that is exclusively the writer's own, individual, unique' and which leaves in the reader 'an intangible residuum of pleasure'. What are we to make, overall, of this subjectivist (yet finely perceived) approach to the apprehension of writerly quality? It derives its force from being based on the preceding careful analysis of various writerly elements: the 'discipline' required not to force the subject and, related to this, the disinterested emergence of the subject based on the mood created by the writer. It also includes the 'as if unconsciously' presented 'material investiture of the writing'; the relevant detail that is part of the emotion recorded; the 'reserved, fastidious hand of an artist', never tempted to over-adorn or over-dramatize the material; the qualities of endurance involved in creating 'Literature' – 'persistence, survival, recurrence'; the difference between immediate impressions and slowly crystallised literary art and the conflation of form with content tied to a sense of the life-force in the writing, at one with the subject written about.

Conclusion

Achieved form in autobiography is founded on 'sincerity' of construction, which is in turn premised on strenuousness. By now, I hope it is clear that I am not advocating a conception of form as merely fixed structure. Rather, I think of form as being involved in meaning, and it therefore continuously opens up possibilities regarding our relationship with the work in question. Debray Genette (2004:71) distinguishes between 'semantic effect' or the direct 'telling' involved in writing and 'semiological effect' or the indirect 'signification' involved, providing us with another means of distinguishing between the Levinasian 'said' and 'saying'. Although these two effects interpenetrate, perhaps it is above all the latter which in the end gives a work its singular nature and which produces a form that is not restrictive and mechanical but rather suggestive, evocative of alterity. For Levinas, the meeting with the other,



which is always in process as we negotiate our way through life with that which is outside us or beyond us, involves an 'interruption' of one's otherwise engulfing self-hood whereby the singularity of the other enters the perception of the self, whether one is reader or writer. This entrance of the other is related to the 'saying' (with its emphasis on continual revelation, on being open to otherness) as opposed to the 'said' (with its emphasis on the completed statement, on not needing further exploration) (Levinas [1974] 1997:5–7, 44, 48–49). The sense of an otherness that is not to be circumscribed by rule and measurement marks the saying of a singular autobiography, as does the sense that it will continually unfold itself, that it will never exhaust all readerly possibilities.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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