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LEARNING TO LIVE BETWEEN THE LINES: THE SURVIVAL OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS GENRE AND THE EXAMPLE OF TOBIAS WOLFF'S *THIS BOY'S LIFE*

Abstract

Taking my cue from the seemingly paradoxical title of this special issue of *Brno Studies in English*: – “Living Between the Lines: Transgressive (Auto)Biography as Genre and Method” – this paper examines a critically acclaimed and enormously popular American memoir of the late twentieth century: Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life* (1989). Well-written, straightforward, beginning at the beginning and ending at the ending, this old-fashioned memoir simply attempts to tell the truth about Wolff’s past while imagining the self in conventional Cartesian terms as stable, unitary, and essential. This seemingly naïve approach to memoir is surprising, especially since, as a creative writer who has found a home in academia, Wolff might have been expected to produce a self-reflexive text that more obviously challenged the lines typically drawn between autobiography and fiction. After all, it has been twenty years since Sidonie Smith remarked that “It has been the critical fashion to speak knowingly of autobiography’s fictiveness for at least a decade now” (145). Smith alludes to Paul de Man’s influential essay, “Autobiography as Defacement” (1979), which prompted many critics to regard autobiography as nothing more than a mere mask behind which no real self can ever hide, since the self is itself a linguistic construct. Early reports of the death of autobiography were, however, exaggerated. In my analysis of Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life*, I hope to show why a sophisticated and long-time academic such as Wolff might still write a conventional yet knowing memoir. His memoir reminds us why autobiography remains indispensable, no matter how fully we absorb the truths that language inevitably disfigures while our memories inevitably betray us. In the end, Wolff’s memoir suggests, only the heartfelt autobiographical account satisfies the autobiographical impulse, since confession and faith – if not necessarily a faith in God – remain the existential imperatives that have motivated autobiography since Augustine.

Key words

Tobias Wolff; *This Boy’s Life*; *autobiography*; *memoir*; *Paul de Man*; *confession*; *faith*

Taking my cue from the seemingly paradoxical title of this special issue of *Brno Studies in English*: – “Living Between the Lines: Transgressive (Auto)Biography as Genre and Method” – this paper examines a critically acclaimed and enormously popular American memoir of the late twentieth century: Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life* (1989) (subsequently made into a movie starring Robert De Niro and Leonardo DiCaprio), in an attempt to explain why a writer with a postmodern sensibility would write such a conventional “between the lines” autobiography.

Stepping outside the lines myself, I am thus transgressing the conference’s ostensible subject, “transgressive (auto)biography,” and focusing instead on a memoir that I will argue is strikingly traditional. Well-written, straightforward, beginning at the beginning and ending at the ending, this old-fashioned memoir simply attempts to tell the truth about Wolff’s past, to the extent that he can manage it, while imagining the self in ultimately Cartesian terms as stable, unitary, and essential.

To most of the reading world, this may seem unremarkable, but to an academic like myself Wolff’s seemingly naïve approach to memoir is mildly surprising, especially since, as a creative writer who has found a home in academia Wolff might have been expected to write a more obviously self-reflexive text that challenged the lines typically drawn between autobiography and fiction, as many writers of his era have done. What is much less surprising, to me anyway, is an academic conference with the title “Living Between the Lines: Transgressive (Auto)Biography as Genre and Method.” After all, almost twenty years ago Sidonie Smith, the leading American scholar of women’s autobiography, remarked that “It has been the critical fashion to speak knowingly of autobiography’s fictiveness for at least a decade now” (Smith 1990: 145). Smith perhaps alludes, at least indirectly, to Paul de Man’s influential essay, “Autobiography as Defacement” (1979), which prompted many academics to view autobiography as inevitably nothing more than a mere surface, a mask behind which no real self could ever hide, since the self is nothing more than a linguistic construct. For at least thirty years, then, and probably longer, it has seemed naïve to think that one could write one’s life and produce as a result the truth of one’s past. The past, critical fashion has dictated, is a distorting linguistic construction produced in the present by memories that are faulty and merely perspectival in the first place. To believe that one can reconstruct the past, or put more simply, that one can tell the truth, has in the world of literary criticism long seemed as old-fashioned and provincial as going to church and believing in God and the resurrection. At least in the academic world of literary criticism and theory, transgressing the conventions has become the new convention. In examining a recent but conventional autobiography, I’m hoping, however, to do more than just play a cute game with the conference title. I hope to show why a sophisticated and long-time academic such as Wolff might still write a conventional yet knowing memoir, one that acknowledges the ways in which theory has challenged the traditional distinction between fiction and nonfiction while maintaining it nevertheless. That a sophisticated academic can still find the conventional memoir a vital genre while resurrecting an ostensibly

outdated notion of the self as a stable and essential consciousness despite their theoretical inconsistencies points, I would suggest, to the likely long-term survival and relative health of the traditional memoir as genre and to the fact that more “experimental” and “self-reflexive” memoirs will likely prove the much more fleeting phenomenon, if in fact it is not already a bygone trend.

In the light of Paul de Man’s irrefutable logic, previous arguments attempting to distinguish the autobiography from the novel that focused either upon formal distinctions or, in the case of Philippe Lejeune, upon a presumed contract between the author and the reader of the autobiography, seemed suddenly naïve and quaint. What contract could there be between author and reader when language itself was the mask behind which there could be no there there? What meaningful formal distinctions could there be anymore between prose fiction and prose non-fiction? Were not all histories, personal or otherwise necessarily fiction to some forever indeterminate extent? Was de Man not surely right that in trying to write our “faces” we inevitably “deface” ourselves since language itself is a cultural construction never sufficient to describe reality. In light of such arguments one might have been forgiven for presuming that the autobiography would soon collapse into the novel as a single, indistinguishable genre.

As it has turned out, however, early reports of the death of autobiography were exaggerated. The last thirty years have revealed that, like capitalism, the genre of autobiography has proven more durable and adaptive than it once seemed, while the novel continues to thrive as a distinct, and still the preeminent, literary genre of our time. Autobiography nevertheless remains, I would argue, an indispensable genre, one that human beings cannot do without, no matter how fully we understand and absorb the truths that language inevitably disfigures while our memories inevitably betray us, not least because they are inevitably dependent upon individual perspectives. We know all this, but, in the end, only the heartfelt autobiographical account can satisfy any writer’s autobiographical impulse, if she has one, since confession and faith – if not necessarily a faith in God – remain the existential imperatives that have motivated autobiography since Augustine and doubtless before.

Arriving at Faith: Autobiography after Deconstruction

In trying to explain the continued relevance of autobiography as a genre despite seemingly devastating deconstructive arguments, leading theorists of autobiography, such as the French Philippe Lejeune, the American Paul John Eakin, and the Spaniard, Angel G. Loureiro, have argued with a remarkable unanimity that the difference remains a matter of faith, if not exactly of the religious sort in the traditional sense. In his defense of his concept of the “autobiographical pact,” for example, Lejeune (1989:131) succinctly, if sarcastically, summarizes the arguments of those such as de Man “for whom critical deconstruction is essential,” and which by now have become so familiar as to become practically traditional in

academia: “what illusion to believe that we can tell the truth, and to believe that each of us has an individual and autonomous existence! How can we think that in autobiography it is the lived life that produces the text, when it is the text that produces the life! ... Doesn’t the formal quibbling that I practice grant an efficient virtue to what is only a surface phenomenon?” To this succinct recapitulation of deconstructionist claims, Lejeune responds with what seems an equally sarcastic statement of his own faith but which turns out to be utterly sincere:

It’s better to get on with the confessions: yes, I have been fooled I believe that we can promise to tell the truth; I believe in the transparency of language, and in the existence of a complete subject who expresses himself through it. ... I believe that when I say “I,” it is I who am speaking: I believe in the Holy Ghost of the first person. ... “In the field of the subject, there is no referent.” ... *We indeed know* all this; we are not so dumb, but once this precaution has been taken, we go on as if we did not know it. ... In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing. Perhaps, in describing it, I in turn took my desire for reality; but what I had wanted to do, was to describe this desire in its reality, a reality shared by a great number of authors and readers. (Lejeune 1989: 131–32)

As Lejeune’s remarks clearly reveal, he is not a naïve theorist of autobiography; he fully understands all of the deconstructive arguments that make autobiography impossible. What is especially remarkable, however, is the sort of language he employs as he argues that autobiography remains indispensable despite its impossibility. First of all, he characterizes his statement that autobiography remains for him a distinct and vital genre as a “confession.” In this sense his own theoretical critique becomes a kind of autobiography. Furthermore, he posits, his urge to write about and to define autobiography from a critical perspective is perhaps only that, an urge, a desire, that does not necessarily reflect a reality. A desire for what? Again, he couches the answer in religious terms: it is the desire to believe in the “Holy Ghost of the first person,” a desire that, if it does not reflect a reality, he can at least comfort himself in knowing is still shared by many writers and readers other than himself, some of whom are even, like himself, not naïve.

Indeed, Lejeune can count the best known American scholar of autobiography, Paul John Eakin, among their number. In one of his numerous books on the subject of American autobiography, Eakin (1992: 69) examines the autobiographies of Henry James, arguing that in James’s contradictory accounts of an “obscure hurt” suffered as a young man one discerns “the missing verifiable referents for the inner truth that had left no trace.” In other words, Eakin claims to discover in James’s autobiographies a reality merely psychical and which can have no worldly referent but which is nevertheless real, and which could only have been brought to the surface by James through language. Eakin (1992: 67) is to this extent, he admits, “unreconstructed by theory when it comes to reference.” But how can Eakin have any confidence in what he himself admits is merely his

“hunch” about elusive psychological truths when reading the autobiography of a long dead writer like James? Eakin, like Lejeune, proffers nothing more, or less, than a statement of faith. Although he acknowledges that he “could wish for a firmer methodological ground from which to proceed,” he nevertheless asserts that “when it comes to the determination of fact in such texts, a distinctly subjective impulse to trust is going to be decisive in the last analysis” (Eakin 1992: 67–68). Thus, like Lejeune, he knowingly resists the logical rigor of deconstructive arguments which point to the disfiguring nature of all texts, relying instead on what he refers to as “instinct” and elsewhere as a “hunch” (Eakin 1992: 47), secular words for what we might as easily call “faith.” It turns out, then, that two of our foremost authorities on the theory and criticism of autobiography have suggested that to distinguish the genre of autobiography from the novel requires a leap of faith, both on the part of the autobiographer and on the part of the reader. The autobiographer must trust in the “Holy Ghost of the first person,” while also having faith that the language he or she employs will, somehow, not only convey what he or she intended but will also, somehow, tell the truth. The reader, in supposing that any autobiography tells a “true story,” must take that same leap, trusting, perhaps, some parts of the autobiography more and some less and relying in the last analysis on “instinct” or merely a “hunch.”

As both Lejeune’s and Eakin’s work bears out, one may still, even in this post-deconstructionist age, *believe* in our ability to tell truths through language without being naïve, even if such a *belief* must now be understood as an act of faith rather than as the typical result of close and methodical reading. Furthermore, both Lejeune and Eakin describe autobiography as an act of confession, one that distorts the teller as well as the truth he has to tell but which remains nonetheless indispensable. To echo Lejeune’s terms, the impossibility of confession in no way prevents us from confessing, for even in our secular age, only confession satisfies certain existential imperatives. Knowing what we know regarding the insufficiencies of language and memory, we still feel a profound need to tell our stories and to reveal ourselves just as though our stories are true and just as though we have knowable and finite selves to reveal. In his attempt to explain this autobiographical impulse, Spanish critic Angel G. Loureiro, turns to the work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. According to Loureiro’s interpretation of Levinas, the subject can only be defined relationally; we know ourselves and can distinguish ourselves only to the extent that we can define ourselves against an Other. As Loureiro (2000: xi) puts it, “for Levinas the self is not an autonomous, self-positing identity, but it originates as a response to, and thus as a responsibility toward, the other.” The autobiographical impulse, according to Loureiro, is thus the product of the subject’s deep and irresistible responsibility to this Other on whom the subject depends for its definition. As Loureiro (2000: xii) further contends, “Any autobiographical statement is a response to another that demands that one explain oneself. By displaying this responsibility, autobiography shows its ethical nature.” This means, Loureiro argues, that all autobiographies are “confessions in that they render accounts to an other that, although invisible, unacknowledged,

or even negated leaves its unquestionable imprint in any autobiography. No other genre's thematics and strategies are so dependent on, and determined by, its addressees" (Loureiro 2000: xiii). "The autobiographer thus gives himself to an obscure, imprecise addressee whose unremitting demands cannot be refused," since "there is no self without an other who listens constantly, even in the midst of the greatest silence or the greatest solitude" (Loureiro 2000: xvi).

In their attempt to explain why autobiography remains an indispensable genre despite its theoretical untenability, Lejeune, Eakin, and Loureiro all reach for terms that verge on the religious, or what we might call the mythic. In this, I would suggest that, although their terms vary, all three describe an essential human dynamic which Ernest Becker outlined long ago in his Pulitzer Prize-winning study, *The Denial of Death* (1973). There Becker argues that a rational or scientific explanation of the ends of human existence can never by itself satisfy the existential longings of the human imagination, since we inevitably seek to demonstrate our significance, or to employ Becker's term, our heroism, on a cosmic and thus an ultimate basis. This "urge to cosmic heroism," he writes, "is sacred and mysterious and not to be neatly ordered and rationalized by science and secularism." In this respect, an old-fashioned human solution serves best: "the only way to get beyond the natural contradictions of existence [is] in the timeworn religious way: to project one's problems onto a God-figure, to be healed by an all-embracing, all-justifying beyond" (Becker 1973: 285). In Becker's analysis, the distinction between the secular and the religious disappears. Whether the terms we employ are "secular" or "religious" in the traditional sense, we seek to assure ourselves of an ultimate significance. In this, as Lejeune suggests, we must first believe in the "Holy Ghosts" of ourselves as distinct, stable, and to some extent autonomous and thus responsible entities whose stories *can* be told; furthermore, as Eakin argues, we inevitably seek to express the truths we *feel* but cannot otherwise demonstrate. Finally, Becker concurs with Loureiro: priest or atheist, we cannot help but address ourselves to the "beyond," submitting ourselves to an ultimate, transcendent Other we imagine as listening and *justifying* us, for it is this justification that we seek most of all. Because we feel small, and because at the same time we feel like stable, autonomous and thus responsible selves, we feel compelled to give witness even to those traceless truths we can only feel, and witnessing them to an Other that we imagine as transcendent or ultimate. As Becker (1973: 172) explains, "even the strongest person has to exercise the Agape motive, has to lay the burden of his life somewhere beyond him," and artists, Becker contends, feel this urge even more sharply than most. Autobiography, then, is ultimately the product of guilt, a guilt that, is "inevitable for man" (Becker 1973: 172). No one, Becker contends, can "justify his own heroism.[...] He would have to be as God," which means that "the more you develop as a free and critical human being, the more guilt you have. Your very work accuses you; it makes you feel inferior. What right do you have to play God?" (1973: 172). For this very reason, the art one produces oneself can never be in itself a sufficient justification, so that no artist can "be at peace with his work or with the society that accepts it" (Becker

1973: 173). The artist's gift, Becker argues, and for my purposes I believe I can safely say the autobiographer's, is an offering, an offering that must be made to "creation itself, to the ultimate meaning of life, to God, since absolution has to come from the absolute beyond" (1973: 173). We may even know, as Lejeune, Eakins, Loureiro, and Becker all do, that the felt desire is not the same as the reality, but as each in his own way has argued, that will not stop us from relying on what may only be indispensable illusions.

Confessions of Faith: Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*

The memoir of Tobias Wolff offers an example of a knowing and, to some extent, self-reflexive autobiography that nevertheless insist not only that we must have faith in our power to tell the truth about our pasts but also that such truth-telling offers us a kind of salvation. Wolff's memoir suggests that, however much language and memory may distort the past, there are truths that autobiography can tell, that there is such a category as the lie, as distinct from the fictive, and that our faith in our ability to know the difference, is crucial to our humanness in a way that will likely never go out of literary fashion.

That his concept of the self and his understanding of the autobiographical act is modern, complex, and not the least naïve, is abundantly clear throughout Wolff's memoir, beginning with the first of his two epigraphs, a witticism from Oscar Wilde: "The first duty in life is to assume a pose. What the second is no one has yet discovered" (Wolff 1989: 1). Applied to Wolff's memoir, Wilde's statement points to Wolff's conception of the self, which, to the extent that he imagines it as mere performance, often seems strikingly postmodern. The memoir proper begins when as an eleven-year-old boy Wolff and his mother are on the run from her most recent boyfriend and heading west together, which seems to the both of them an opportunity to reinvent themselves, to inhabit new roles. "I was caught up," Wolff writes, "in my mother's dream of transformation" (5). His new self would be a distinctly more masculine one, conjured from "dreams of freedom, of dominion and taciturn self-sufficiency" (8). This project began, Wolff explains, with a change from his given name; he would no longer be called Toby, a name that had seemed to him too ambiguously gendered, ever since he met a female "Toby" in the fifth grade. He would introduce himself in his new school as "Jack, after Jack London" (and from here forward I will refer to the juvenile Wolff as "Jack" in order to more clearly distinguish Wolff the narrator from his subject) (8). Jack develops this new identity most fully in the long letters filled with lies that he sends to a female pen pal in Arizona whom he has never met:

I represented myself to her as the owner of a palomino horse named Smiley who shared my encounters with mountain lions, rattlesnakes, and packs of coyotes on my father's ranch, the Lazy B. When I wasn't busy on the ranch I raised German Shepherds and played for several athletic teams. Although

Alice was a terse and irregular correspondent, I believed that she must be in awe of me, and imagined someday presenting myself at her door to claim her adoration. (13)

As young Jack matures the self he imagines himself performing becomes less obviously fantastic, but this passage describes the consistently stereotypical dream of American masculine fulfillment that motivates him. His ideal self, the mask he strives to fit, typically involves money, athletic prowess, masculine, outdoor adventure, and the imagined awe and adoration of a (preferably female) audience.

Wolff reconstructs his adolescence as a series of variations on this performance of the American masculine self, epitomized by his participation in the Boy Scouts. Jack, however, is continually haunted by the fear that the shadow of that Boy Scout self, the working-class, small-town boy who routinely steals change from his newspaper customers is the more authentic. The memoir's title, *This Boy's Life* reflects that ironic distance. "Boy's Life," of course, was then and still is the official youth magazine of the Boy Scouts, so that Wolff's title points to the gap between the ideal Scout life depicted in the pages of the official magazine and the life that he, as Jack, actually led. By this time Jack's mother had married an abusive, alcoholic mechanic and they were now living as a family in an utterly unromantic working-class town in Washington state. Wolff reflects that he enjoyed Scouting in these years because it offered him an opportunity to wear visible symbols of achievement that helped him to believe, at least momentarily, that he was that ideal man-boy represented in the magazine pages. The outdated, hand-me-down Scout "uniform, baggy and barren though it was" makes Jack "feel like a soldier" (102). The system of merit badges through which the Scout rises through the ranks likewise satisfies Jack's naked adolescent urge to impress others and to reassure himself of his own heroism through visible proofs of masculine accomplishment. As Wolff explains,

the main purpose of scouting as I understood it was to accumulate symbols that would compel respect, or at least civility, from those who shared them and envy from those who did not. Conspicuous deeds of patriotism and piety, rope craft, water wisdom, fire wizardry, first-aid, all the arts of forest and mountain and stream, seemed to me just different ways of getting badges. (102)

While the badges offer a visible verification of his successful masculine performance, the magazine "Boy's Life" offers a similarly irresistible "narcotic invitation to believe that [he] was really no different from the boys whose hustle and pluck it celebrated. Boys who raised treasure from Spanish galleons, and put empty barns to use by building operational airplanes in them. Boys who skied to the North Pole. Boys who sailed around the horn, solo" (104). "Boy's Life" thus constructs for him in a neat, pre-packaged form the ideal boy's life, every boy's life as it *should* be, every masculine self as *he* should be. But Jack's life, of course,

is “*this boy’s* life,” a particular, individuated life, a self that, no matter how he puffs it up, he cannot make fill out the baggy uniform of cultural stereotype for very long.

Once in high school, the uniform which young Jack tries to fill evolves, without much change, however, in its essential outline, as he casts aside the boyhood adventures represented by the baggy, oversized boy-soldier uniform in favor of the well-tailored suits of the Ivy League social climber. Like the Boy Scout uniform, this one also comes with a handbook: Vance Packard’s *The Status Seekers*, which, Wolff explains, was intended as a democratic critique of the elite class that attempted “to explain how the upper class perpetuated itself” (207). To Jack, however, it appears to be “a perfect guide for social climbers. He listed the places you should live and the colleges you should go to and the clubs you should join and the faith you should confess. He named the tailors and stores you should patronize and described with filigree exactitude the way you could betray your origins” (207). Like a detailed character description from a play’s stage directions, Packard’s book seems to offer Jack a precise description of the most desirable self to present to the world. In this third transmutation, the goal of Jack’s performance shifts from the appearance of masculine adventure and conquest, to the appearance of achieved social status, where the visible symbols of that self are no longer merit badges but clothing labels and prep school diplomas. As Packard’s book teaches Jack, in the small world of the cultural elite, “Harvard or Yale or Princeton is not enough. It is the really exclusive prep school that counts [...]” (208).

The energy Jack once focused on boy scout manuals and magazines, he now applies to gaining acceptance into a prestigious prep school, but he discovers that, in light of his small-town, working-class family background, the uniform of the social elite is as awkward a fit as his old boy scout uniform once was. When he travels to Seattle to take the required aptitude tests, he arrives in an old, salt-and-pepper suit purchased for his eighth grade graduation and which he has since outgrown, whereas the other boys, who in fact seem to come from the elite class to which he aspires, wear identical outfits that only seem casual: “They wore rumpled sports coats and baggy flannel pants. White socks showing above brown loafers [...] the effect would have been careless on just one of them, but it was a uniform, an effect of style, and I took note of it” (212). He studies not only the costume he will need for his performance, but the actors themselves, their mannerisms, and how they spoke with a “predatory, reflexive sarcasm [...] smiled ironically, and rocked on their heels, and tossed their heads like nickering horses” (212).

Having narrated the process of growing up as a series of more or less imperfectly adopted identities, Wolff describes the autobiographical act itself as the memoir’s climactic performance, the ultimate moment of self-invention. While clothes and mannerisms can be purchased and mimicked, the performance of prep school social elite requires a written application. Because Jack had never before recognized academic achievement as a crucial aspect of his performance of American masculinity, his applications to prestigious Eastern prep schools require

a thorough falsification of his school record. With the help of a friend who steals for him blank transcript forms and the appropriate school letterhead, Jack invents his own grades and writes his own letters of recommendation. Wolff describes his composition of these letters – letters filled with lies about himself, about how he was on the swim team, how he was a straight A student, how he was a prodigy who had advanced beyond the resources of his public high school – as an act of self-invention, naturally, but also, paradoxically, as an act of self-discovery.

I wrote the first drafts deliberately, with much crossing out and penciling in, but with none of the hesitancy I'd felt before. Now the words came as easily as if someone were breathing them into my ear. I felt full of things that had to be said, full of stifled truth. That was what I thought I was writing – the truth. It was truth known only to me, but I believed in it more than I believed in the facts arrayed against it. I believed that in some sense not factually verifiable I was a straight-A student. In the same way, I believed I was an Eagle Scout, and a powerful swimmer, and a boy of integrity. These were ideas about myself that I had held onto for dear life. Now I gave them voice. [...]

I wrote without heat or hyperbole, in the words my teachers would have used if they had known me as I knew myself. These were their letters. And on the boy who lived in their letters, the splendid phantom who carried all my hopes, it seemed to me I saw, at last, my own face. (214)

Wolff's lines evince a tension between the way the letters lie about his record and the way in which they nonetheless tell a kind of truth that no record or test score can verify. The "splendid phantom" of the boy he himself has invented on purloined stationary nonetheless expresses an autobiographical truth of the sort described by Eakin, and which in Eakin's terms provide "the missing verifiable referents for the inner truth that had left no trace." On the one hand, the letters are pure forgeries. On the other hand, they describe the boy that Jack has always thought he *truly* was, or rather that he has always hoped he might really become. They reflect, more than anything else, his own faith in himself, a faith no one who knew him, excepting his mother, would have shared but which, it turns out, was not misplaced. Somehow in the lies he writes about himself, he sees a face that seems like his own, and the language Wolff employs is such that it is never quite clear that the young Jack was wrong, that he was only deceiving himself once again.

If, as the epigraph from Wilde suggests, not to mention Wolff's narrative itself, there is no stable self beneath the various poses and masks we try, adopt, then the feeling Jack has of, finally, discovering his own face in his letters filled with lies is only another in a long series of self-delusions, another instance of Jack the actor believing in his own performance. But Wolff's construction of that moment also leaves open another possibility, the distinctly outdated notion that, however much the self may only seem to be a series of constantly shifting performances, there

is nonetheless somebody there, a more stable, finite self behind the masks, difficult if not impossible to verify, yet somehow true. The boy that Jack describes in his letters is, after all, not a rotten liar who cares only for the social status that a prestigious private school offers. He is not a small-minded status-seeker, nor is he the adventurous boy-rancher or boy-soldier of his childhood fantasies. Rather the self Jack sees reflected in his forged letters is a boy of intelligence and integrity, a scholar who humbly tells the truth about himself and who works hard to achieve and advance himself. And in this case, the boy, or at least the phantom of the boy, is father to the man. Wolff's enigmatic language reflects an unresolved tension between these two possibilities. On the one hand, it may illustrate the suggestion of George Orwell in his famous essay, "Shooting an Elephant": that "he wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it" (76). In that case the face, or self, is malleable, fluid, and the mask or conventional role one seeks to perform determines the performance. On the other hand, Orwell's metaphor leaves open the possibility that behind the mask there remains a "real" or authentic, essential self, one that the mask contorts and distorts. Is it that the young Toby finally manages to fit his face to the mask and so sees at last what seems to be his own face, or is it that he finally sees through the series of masks he has tried on, that his true self only now becomes recognizable because in this "phantom" version someone resembling his authentic self emerges?

The possibility that in his forged recommendation letters Jack finally gives voice to "the stifled truth," even if a truth "known only to [him]self" seems less like Jack's further self-delusion and more like an earnest possibility proposed by the author when we consider both the memoir's narrative voice and the academic writer, husband and father that Tobias Wolff actually became by the time he composed this memoir. In his construction of Jack, the adult narrator strikes precisely the confessional tone that might be expected of a "boy of integrity," a "gifted and upright boy" who upon reaching adulthood looks back at his youthful self with a confidence that makes the jaundiced eye of self-criticism and self-deprecation possible. A passage describing Jack's pubescent devotion to Annette Funicello of "The Mickey Mouse Club" is typical of Wolff's merciful and humorous self-criticism:

It was understood that we were all holding a giant bone for Annette. This was our excuse for watching the show, and for me it was partly true. I had certain ideas of the greater world that Annette belonged to, and I wanted a place in this world. I wanted it with all the feverish, disabling hunger of first love ... I had begun writing Annette.

At the end of every show the local station gave an address for Mousketeer Mail [...]. I kept writing Annette and began to imagine a terrible accident in front of her house that would almost but not quite kill me, leaving me dependent on her care and sympathy, which in time would turn to admiration, love [...]. (43–44)

The earnest accuracy with which Wolff recounts his youthful dreams expresses a self-mockery alloyed with a bemused sensibility that suggests the adult narrator forgives himself as a parent would his own son. Put simply, Wolff's narrative voice reads precisely like the adult fulfillment of that phantom boy who first emerged while he was writing his own letters of recommendation; where the young Jack can "afford to be terse and modest" in the self-descriptions he includes in his private school applications because he knows his recommenders will be more detailed and effusive in their praise (as he will write their letters himself), so the adult narrator can now expose his youthful lies and evasions, seemingly secure in the knowledge that the phantom self was the real boy after all.

The adult narrator can in some sense rest in the confidence that the evidence of his personal and professional accomplishments since his ill-spent youth is available to his reader from other sources. Wolff has suggested in an interview that, for the most part, he resisted revealing the adult success he has become since the years of juvenile misadventures that his memoir reconstructs because, after all, "[t]he boy lives this life ignorant of what is going to happen to him later – as we all do. The child is alone. The child, as I say in the book, moves out of reach of the man" (Lyons 1990: 3). Occasionally, however, Wolff brings the man he became into view, as when he describes Jack's generally placid acceptance of his father's absence in his life. Jack excuses his father's absence in part because his father "had the advantage always enjoyed by the inconstant parent, of not being there to be found imperfect" (Wolff 1989: 121). Thus, Jack could "imagine good reasons, even romantic reason, why he had taken no interest, why he had never written to me, why he seemed to have forgotten I existed" (121). In a passage that points to the competent adult and loving, attentive father Jack will one day become, the narrator leaps to the future to describe his feelings upon his *own* first experience of fatherhood:

The first time I saw him, in the hospital nursery, a nurse was trying to take a blood sample from him. She couldn't find a vein. She kept jabbing him, and every time the needle went in I felt it myself. [...] When I finally got my hands on him I felt as if I had snatched him from a pack of wolves [...]. But at the same time I felt a shadow, a coldness at the edges. [...] It was about my father. [...] It was grief and rage, mostly rage, and for days I shook with it when I wasn't shaking with joy for my son and for the new life I had been given. (122)

Where Jack's attempts to be a boy soldier or status seeker are described by the adult narrator as studied and artificial, he describes his subsequent love for his son as spontaneous and from the depths; his love for and identification with his son was apparently so authentic he could not help but feel the pain his newborn son felt, could not help but shake with rage over having been abandoned by his own father while shaking with joy over his new son's existence. Where Wolff construes everything Jack feels as a pose or a performance, his paternity is some-

thing he cannot help but feel. In such passages, the notion that self is merely to “assume a pose” seems entirely in abeyance.

That Jack recognizes in his forged recommendation letters a phantom self who achieves his fulfillment in the adult narrator is further reinforced by the extra-textual hints available to the reader. For example, Wolff dedicates the memoir “To Michael and Patrick,” whom the reader feels safe in presuming are his beloved sons. Furthermore, the back of the paperback offers us a photograph of the adult Wolff: balding, mustached, handsome, and in a tweedy sport coat, he seems every bit the handsome and serious but humble and earnest academic evinced by Wolff’s narrative voice, the professorial adult once promised by the earnest boy of integrity who first appeared in the plagiarized letters of recommendation. A brief author biography next to the picture further confirms what the reader has no difficulty believing: that Wolff has published several volumes of short stories and lives with his wife and family in upstate New York where he has long been a professor of Creative Writing at Syracuse University, all of which reassures the reader that the adult was a discovery and an inevitability, rather than a continuing and continuously shifting performance. Wolff’s memoir thus expresses an unresolved tension between its construction of the self as a series of culturally determined performances, replete with uniforms and guidebooks, and a more traditional, even romantic, construction of the self as unique and individual, one of depths that must be uncovered and discovered rather than of surfaces. While the record of his boyhood and youth suggest that the face strains to fit the mask, Wolff leaves open the possibility that the masks can be taken off, that the self exists to be revealed. Or, we might even say that despite what Wolff knows about the extent to which self is performance, he nevertheless expresses his faith in the integrity of the individual self.

Wolff’s understated but still evident faith that the self may ultimately consist in something more like the Cartesian mind or soul rather than the culturally-determined performance usually suggested by postmodern theorists is suggested by the very traditionalism of his otherwise highly self-conscious and self-reflexive memoir. Despite the fact that he often appears to imagine his own development from childhood through adolescence as a trying on of identities, Wolff’s memoir is from another perspective a traditional confession, an old-fashioned baring of the soul, an attempt to admit the truth about the lying sinner he was which presumes a faith in his present ability to distinguish truth from fiction, the poses from the reality. In his “Acknowledgments,” for example, Wolff thanks various family members, including his mother and brother, for their help in correcting his memory: “I have been corrected on some points, mostly of chronology. Also my mother thinks that a dog I describe as ugly was actually quite handsome. I’ve allowed some of these points to stand, because this is a book of memory, and memory has its own story to tell. But I have done my best to make it tell a truthful story” (Wolff 1989: np). These remarks, more than anything, express Wolff’s self-confidence in the story he has told. If on the one hand, his words reveal that those who lived his past with him maintain their own, differing perspectives on those events – where one sees a

dog as ugly, another pair of eyes saw him as handsome – Wolff’s implies that the differences in their perspectives are typically minor. What matter if a dog was ugly or handsome? The effect of these remarks is to suggest that Wolff’s subjectivity will express itself only in regard to minor, unimportant matters, mere aesthetic judgments, and not moral ones. Likewise, his admission that his memory has needed correction on points of chronology inspires the reader’s trust, suggesting that while he may have needed help remembering *when* some events happened, his memory of *what* exactly happened remained accurate.

The most significant aspect of Wolff’s acknowledgment, however, is his admission that he has allowed some points in his memoir “to stand” despite the criticism of other’s memories, that his “memory has its own story to tell” and that he has done his “best to make it tell a truthful story.” These points are crucial because, perhaps more nakedly than most modern memoirs, Wolff’s is a confession of the most traditional, Roman Catholic sort, and one of its central themes is that, however shifting or indeterminate the truth may be, the act of truth-telling is a redemptive act of faith that can never be made obsolete. Wolff’s memoir suggests that confession does not require a perfect memory, an objective account of the past, or even perfect honesty. Rather, it requires one’s “best” effort at achieving each of these ideals, with faith sufficing to fill the gap. It offers, Wolff suggests, the only relief from being merely human that one can find in this life. As he reminds us in the second of his two epigraphs: “He who fears corruption fears life.”

To tell the truth about oneself, or to try to, is thus an admittance that one has lived and has thus been corrupted. Wolff makes the point early in his memoir when he describes how his mother demanded that he attend catechism classes and be baptized a Catholic as the condition for allowing him to re-name himself Jack. The once-a-week catechism class taught by Sister James reinforces in Jack his profound sense of his own inadequacy, feelings he had childishly dreamed he could cast off as easily as his first name. Wolff writes, “I was subject to fits of feeling myself unworthy, somehow deeply at fault. It didn’t take much to bring this sensation to life, along with the certainty that everybody but my mother saw through me and did not like what they saw” (12). As an adult Wolff recognizes that this profound sense of his own guilt and unworthiness had little to do with Sister James herself, who in fact “hated talking about sin” and for whom Jack’s playground misdemeanors surely seemed nothing more than “just another boy doing some dumb boyish thing” (12). Jack, however, imagines that she maintains a clear window onto his corrupted soul: “[...] I began to feel that she knew all about me, and that a good part of her life was now given over to considering how bad I was” (12). In a scene reflective of Wolff’s entire autobiographical project, he describes his first attempt at confession. It is a failure but not, in fact, because Jack fails to tell the truth about his transgressions – although he does – but because he feels his own failings are so complete and entire as to be beyond utterance:

I thought about what to confess, but I could not break my sense of being at fault down to its components. Trying to get a particular sin out of it was

like fishing a swamp, where you feel the tug of something that at first seems promising and then resistant and finally hopeless as you realize that you've snagged the bottom, that you have the whole planet on the other end of your line. (17)

Jack's failure to conjure up a few plausible sins for the sake of a smooth and efficient confession is the result of his essential honesty. At heart, he feels that his failure is global. Unable to name his sins and categorize them, he borrows the confession of Sister James, who out of sympathy tells him stories of her own early transgressions. Mistaking Jack's second, plagiarized confession for an honest one, the priest absolves him. Upon leaving the confessional the priest remarks to Sister James, "You've got a fine boy here," to which she replies, "So I do, Father, so I do" (22).

This early episode in the memoir operates as a parable for the entire dynamic of confession, and by extension of autobiography itself, as Wolff imagines it. Jack's inability to define his sins, his feeling that he "has the whole planet on the other end of the line" points to the existential nature of his guilt, which is at once so profound as to be unignorable and yet so broad as to be unnamable in its particulars. Autobiography, in this analysis, is the attempt to accurately render one's past in language, which inevitably entails the recording of one's vices and virtues and acknowledgement of one's responsibility for each. In these terms, autobiography is as necessary as it is impossible. Whether we refer to it in the traditional Christian terms of "Original Sin" or in the psychoanalytic terms of Becker as the "guilt of being itself," the universal sense of failure and insufficiency makes the urge to confess inevitable. As Wolff's story suggests, the sense of our general insufficiency is available on some level even to the child, but to enumerate one's failings in a way that accurately reflects the extent of one's personal responsibility requires the kind of divine insight that guides Minos in Dante's *Inferno* as he whirls each sinner to the particular circle in Hell where a divine and perfect retribution can be exacted.

Jack's false confession can be read as a parable of the autobiographical situation as it has been described by Lejeune, Eakin, and Loureiro. Lejeune writes that the impossibility of autobiography in no way keeps it from existing, and just so the impossibility of a true confession cannot keep Jack from attempting it. Jack still makes his confession, even if he must counterfeit his crimes. His plagiarism of Sister James's confession is naked and obvious to the reader, but not to his immediate audience, the priest and Sister James. Thus, when the priest offers the boy a comforting squeeze on the shoulder as he announces that Jack is a "fine boy," Wolff's readers cannot help but read the words as ironic, since we know what the priest cannot, that Jack is not a fine boy, that he's a mischievous trouble-maker who lies even to priests and nuns. Nevertheless the priest's assessment of Jack can also be read non-ironically, as a statement, if an unwitting one, of the real truth about Jack and of all earnest autobiographers. He is indeed well aware of his own failures even if he feels stymied by his inability to articulate them. From this

perspective, the confession that he borrows from Sister James is a stand-in for the authentic but unspeakable referent which, as Paul Eakin suggests, may be true but is unverifiable and leaves no trace. Jack discovers that he cannot confess what he most profoundly feels he has to confess, because to do so would seem absurd. So he borrows the most plausible sounding, pre-packaged confession and offers that up in its stead. The moment is thus a parable of Wolff's larger autobiographical project, the volume itself, which can only be another attempt on the part of its adult author to make a truthful confession, to acknowledge his sins and virtues, to accurately render "this particular boy's life." The difference between Jack's false confession to the priest and Wolff's entire book is actually only a matter of scale. The autobiographical project is doomed to failure, as Wolff knows, but he proceeds as if he did not know it or as if he refuses to accept this reality. Like Jack's interview with the priest, the book can only amount to a false confession, false in that it can only offer us a distortion of the life – it will be necessarily subjective, partial, shaped by the demands of art, conventions of the genre, audience expectation, and the medium of language itself rather than by a past reality.

Yet, if there is an essential similarity between Jack's youthful false confession and the autobiographical act of the middle-aged author, there remains a crucial and meaningful difference. The false confession of the boyhood self is, after all, an act of despair, the boy having abandoned any further attempt at self-examination because he feels in his heart that he is too entirely corrupted to be redeemed. Wolff's autobiography, however, amounts to a testament of his faith both in the utility of confession and in his own essential redeemability. Knowing that human language and memory are inadequate to the task of reconstructing the past, Wolff nevertheless perseveres where the boy gives up. As Wolff puts it, "I have done my best to make it tell a truthful story." The boy does not "do his best," nor has he the sophistication to imagine the number of ways in which a story may be "truthful." The adult Wolff's volume is his best attempt at confession and a statement of faith that, despite the insufficiencies of language, memory, and art, we can somehow still tell truths that matter. All of which points to why Wolff, who is not a naïve autobiographer writing in ignorance of recent theoretical critiques of the genre, nevertheless in some ways reads as though he is. The casual reader will find no postmodern, self-reflexive games being played in Wolff's memoir, no corrective chapters offered at the end which undercut the illusion of accuracy, and no chapters that wander off into the realm of myth or fantasy. Like any traditional memoir, it does nothing to disturb the illusion that every word of dialogue between its characters were once actually spoken and are not merely the invention of a skilled writer of short stories. In this respect, Wolff's memoir amounts to the most traditional kind of old-fashioned confession: an enumeration of the author's youthful sins and transgressions that reminds one of St. Augustine and which would satisfy any priest. Wolff bears his soul as though he has one to bear and as though it matters, revealing among a long list of his youthful crimes, his manipulations of his mother, his adolescent crush on his step-sister, that he once kissed a male friend, that he was a poser, an habitual liar, and a small-time thief.

Wolff confesses at length, but he does not, like Augustine, narrate his subsequent Christian conversion. As I suggest above, the adult he has since become, the conscientious family man, law abiding university professor, and, it so happens, practicing Catholic, are only implied, except of course, for the narrator himself, his seeming honesty, his apparent willingness to detail even the most incriminating and embarrassing moments of his past all point to the effective change in the man.

Wolff has since revealed in interviews that despite not having attended Mass since those early days spent in catechism he felt himself drawn to Catholicism as a graduate student at Oxford in the 1970s and has been a practicing Catholic ever since. As recently as 2005, Wolff has said that he still goes to confession once a year (Contino 2005), which reminds us that, however he may have succeeded in the interim, he has inevitably accumulated new sins which will require further confessions. If autobiography survives as a genre despite the lack of any ascertainable difference in its formal elements from the novel, I suggest that it will be as the result of our continued transgressions, transgressions that we will inevitably feel compelled to detail as honestly and as objectively as we can manage, however dishonest and subjective those attempts may be.

In his memoir's final scene, Wolff recalls driving home from Seattle as a teenager when he and his friend Chuck had just "dumped a load of stolen goods," his "wallet [...] thick with bills" which he "would [later] lose at cards in one night" (286–87). Feeling rich and enjoying themselves they begin to sing, Buddy Holly at first and then hymns:

First we sang "I Walk the Garden Alone" and "The Old Rugged Cross," and a few other quiet ones, just to find our range and get in the spirit. Then we sang the roof-raisers. We sang them with respect and we sang them hard, swaying from side to side and dipping our shoulders in counterpoint. Between hymns we drank from the bottle. Our voices were strong. It was a good night to sing and we sang for all we were worth, as if we'd been saved.
(288)

The passage, naturally, is loaded with irony. They sing "as if" they had been saved, but they haven't been. In fact, their wallets are loaded down with the fruits of their crimes. They have not yet been redeemed, and yet still they sing. Wolff has suggested in an interview that the passage is not confessional in the narrow, conventional sense; the boys have confessed nothing to anyone yet. However, he nonetheless intended the passage as "confession in a truer sense, in the largest sense. It's a kind of inclining toward something greater" (Contino 2005). As the scene of his first confession suggests, those who despair never tell their stories, silenced by their own conviction that their failures are global and beyond redemption. Autobiography is only for those who still have faith that they might, somehow, come clean, that they might one day be saved.

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