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Classics Lite:

Teaching the Shorter, Magazine Versions of James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son" and Jonathan Lethem's "The Beards"

Teaching senior citizens memoir writing in a continuing studies class in spring 2016, I looked forward to giving them readings that I've grown wary of assigning to undergraduates, especially freshmen. I've learned that young students have trouble identifying with older narrators, older characters, and their situations. Long, densely expository essays wear them out. For these reasons, in my memoir-themed composition classes and even in an upper-level undergraduate class for non-writing majors on crafting life stories, I favor coming-of-age memoirs over late-life reflections.

Indeed my older students seemed able to identify with a wider range of characters, but they were beginning readers and writers, too, and they balked like freshmen at demanding prose. Disappointingly, this included James Baldwin's iconic "Notes of a Native Son," which depicts his and his father's suffering caused by racism in 1940s America. My retirees respected it, I thought, but most of them didn't enjoy it. "It seems . . . old-fashioned," a student tactfully observed. Baldwin's prose, to me, is delicious, his story compelling, his ideas profound. But "Notes of a Native Son" challenges readers with long, unbroken expository paragraphs and it offers only two space breaks, which demarcate the essay's three numbered sections; the breaks emphasize the essay's classical structure and give two places—just two slender spots—where readers can regroup between acts.

Next time, for novices of whatever age, I'll assign the shorter version of "Native Son" that appeared in November 1955 as "Me and My House" in *Harper's Magazine*. (The essay is available to subscribers as a pdf download; nonsubscribers must purchase the entire issue, on Harper's website, for

\$6.99.) This publication came when Baldwin was 31, and it's a page and a half shorter than what appeared that same year in Baldwin's collection *Notes of a Native Son*, published by Beacon Press, as its title essay. Whether Baldwin cut it himself to fit the magazine's space, or whether an editor pared down his essay, I've been unable to ascertain. But it's an impressive editing job.

After my continuing studies class, I reread this version for the first time in years and realized, again, that the deletions are surprisingly unnoticeable—a few elaborating clauses clipped on this page, an additional sentence shaved on the next. You're aware only of it feeling crisper and reading more quickly. The editor, or Baldwin, also added *seven* space breaks within the essay's numbered sections—three in the long first part, one in the second, and three in the third—where readers can rest and reflect. This simple adding of air to the essay also makes it more accessible.

The first cut in “Me and My House” is one of its most severe. Here's the original paragraph, about Baldwin's father:

He had been born in New Orleans and had been a quiet young man there during the time that Louis Armstrong, a boy, was running errands for the dives and honky-tonks of what was always presented to me as one of the most wicked of cities. My father never mentioned Louis Armstrong, except to forbid us to play his records, but there was a picture of him on our wall for a long time. One of my father's strong-willed female relatives had placed it there and forbade my father to take it down. He never did, but he eventually maneuvered her out of the house and when, some years later, she was in trouble and near death, he refused to do anything to help her.

Here's the passage from the shortened essay, which moves quickly away from the Louis Armstrong digression into the famous following passage in which Baldwin analyzes his father's psyche; what's inside brackets has been trimmed:

He had been born in New Orleans and had been a [quiet] young man there during the time that Louis Armstrong, a boy, was running errands for the dives and honky-tonks of what was always presented to me as one of the most wicked of cities. [My father never mentioned . . .] He was, I think, very handsome. Handsome, proud, and ingrown, “like a toenail,” somebody said. But he looked to me, as I grew older, like pictures I had seen of African tribal chieftains: he really should have been naked, with warpaint on and barbaric mementos, standing among spears. He could be chilling in the pulpit and indescribably cruel in his personal life and he was certainly the most bitter man I have ever met; yet it must be said that there was something else buried in him, which lent him his tremendous power and, even, a rather crushing charm. It had something to do with his blackness, I think—he was very black—and his beauty, and the fact that he knew that he was black but did not know he was beautiful.

One of the few sustained cuts, this revision is useful for debating: is the shorter version better or worse? Here, I find the transition between Armstrong and Baldwin *pere* rather abrupt, but I suspect it won't derail students, who probably won't notice the slight bump. As for the lost content, elsewhere Baldwin sufficiently depicts his father's prickly nature and vindictiveness.

A writer whose aesthetic seriousness I respect, however, had given me grief, a few years before, when I first pondered teaching the *Harper's* version. Granted, “Notes of a Native Son” is a classic. I call it America's greatest essay because it's about America's great topic, race, and because of its memoiristic and structural brilliance. Balanced perfectly between the memoir that pivots on the self and the personal essay that uses the self to inquire into a larger subject, it rebukes those of us who reflexively categorize nonfiction. But most people, like my writer friend, aren't aware that “Notes of a Native Son” initially appeared in the slightly more slender form. Maybe “Me and My House” is stronger *or* weaker than the

canonical version depending on its audience. I'd rather have certain students be more likely to read it than zone out, or not be exposed at all, to Baldwin's ideas, artistry, and experiences.

What finally tipped me toward teaching "Me and My House" over "Notes of a Native Son" was my experience with having my continuing studies students read another masterpiece, Jonathan Lethem's thrilling postmodern essay about influence and loss, "The Beards." It's from his 2005 collection *The Disappointment Artist*. I've taught Lethem's essay before, often in conjunction with "Notes of a Native Son," which is how I first studied them formally myself, in an MFA seminar at Goucher College. The essays, while both about a parent's death, helpfully demonstrate strikingly different structural approaches to personal nonfiction.

Lethem's account in "The Beards" of his art-besotted adolescence occurs during and in the wake of his mother's mortal illness and early death, from cancer, when he was 14. It's a segmented essay, with each segment dated according to his mother's status (diagnosis, stage of illness, or length of time deceased). As depicted, Lethem's intense immersion in heavily synthesized rock music, cerebral foreign films, and countless classic and cult novels inspires awe. Along with being a portrait of the sort of obsessions that might forge an artist, Lethem's art-absorption is inseparable from his point about the particular nature of his loss. His mother, who gave young Jonathan a typewriter shortly before her death, emerges in the writer's cool, elliptical way as loving and artistic. She was and remains his muse and his core subject, as "The Beards" gradually makes clear.

But Lethem's arts analysis in the essay also forms a hurdle for novice readers. My continuing studies students bounced right off it. "What was *that*? All that music and other stuff?" asked a talented writer. My hopes sank for the class loving the essay. The commenter was a fan of segmentation, I knew, yet admitted she'd stopped reading "The Beards" early on. Thus I recalled my sense that "The Beards" seems to tire and bewilder undergraduates as well. For one thing, it challenges almost anyone's own artistic

depth. For another, it's difficult for readers to relate to stories about art utterly unfamiliar to them. And it's hard to reassure students that they don't have to know it all, that they aren't hopelessly lost and that they can learn *from* rather than bring *to* the text. I *know* it's the teacher's job to expose students to classics and help them through them. In practice, and partly because of time constraints, I pick my battles.

Imagine my surprise when, on the heels of my latest disappointing performance in teaching "The Beards," I found the version that the *New Yorker* published, in 2005, as an excerpt from *The Disappointment Artist*. Wow—way shorter. The different formats make exact comparison of the two essays' lengths difficult, however. The magazine's "The Beards" flows across seven and a half double-column pages; the book's version fills 24 book-pages. (In the case of Baldwin's essays, in contrast, after hours of my typing I possess them in identically formatted Word files.)

The *New Yorker's* "The Beards" is missing one entire segment, offering 10 to the book's 11. The dropped passage, "Barry Lyndon (1975, mom undiagnosed)," explains Lethem's artist father's separate life in a commune and Lethem's set of older friends there. He attends Stanley Kubrick's film *Barry Lyndon* with one of them, Libby, a mother of two whose marriage is breaking up. He revels in the lush film, an "account of human vanity and corruption." He admires its indifference "to the suffering of its characters" and its narrative posture "of droll tolerance for human failings."

All this is rich, making its excision, for me, painful. His parents have separated, we've learned, though what enables the segment's removal with less apparent cost may be that Lethem hasn't yet written about his anger toward his father. On the other hand, his faux date with a much older woman foreshadows a later episode in which he makes a similar outing with one of his father's girlfriends, a woman as close to Lethem's age as to his father's.

What's most striking in the magazine's version is not the missing section, though, but that all the essay's remaining sections have been greatly shortened. The first four cuts, in the now-first segment, which analyzes two sides of an album by Robert Fripp and Brian Eno, are illustrative. The initial trim represents

the kind of deft tightening done in Baldwin's essay; the second removes two nice lines evocative of Lethem's experience of the music; the third clips an elaborating clause; the fourth deletes a long, lovely riff from the passage's close.

Here are the first two examples—as before, what's been cut is bracketed:

I also liked the name Eno. It sounded vaguely alien, bliplike, like the names of some of the writers I'd begun to idolize [partly for the distance from the prosaic seemingly encoded in their surnames]: Lem, Kafka, Poe, Borges.

When I got those records home, *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)* turned out to be a sequence of songs in conventional rock format, three to six minutes long, mostly with guitars and drums underlying their creepy, synthesized sound effects and ominous, gnomic lyrics. Perfect, in other words. *No Pussyfooting* was this other thing: a pair of fuzzy electronic suites, which absolutely refused to beguile. I should have filed it in my collection and forgotten it, gravely disappointed, as I'd imagine most of its teen-age buyers were. Instead, I decided I loved "The Heavenly Music Corporation," and hated "Swastika Girls." [The first was, as its name suggested, deeply soothing, the long tones invoking surrender and contemplation. The other was compulsive, boiling, and its name offered a couple of reasons I ought to be intimidated by it.]

By the essay's end, it's clear that the periodical version has been cut to the bone—and some chunks of meat fell away with gristle and fat. Since I revere the original, its content feels compromised.

Yet Lethem's disorientation and sense of loss from his mother's death remain mirrored in the essay's disjointed structure: the dated segments appear in non-chronological order. His grief devastated him as an adolescent, and his ongoing, ever-present loss jumbles his interior sense of time. Less exhaustive but less exhausting to students, this "The Beards" may work even better than the original in showing students how a message can be supported, expressed, and extended through structure.

“I don’t at all mind your teaching the shorter *New Yorker* version of that essay—I’m just glad you put it in front of them at all, especially faced with that very depressing verdict you mention, that they find the cultural references too obscure!” Jonathan Lethem kindly reassured me when I emailed him. He added, “I’m always being reminded of this effect, lately (mostly by my own students)—that my work, and most of what I love, is being swallowed by time, and the onrush of a present reality in which no one knows what any of us are talking about. Since I’m only 52, the prospect for my later life is terrifying—my world is *already* mostly lost.” Lethem said the *New Yorker* needed “The Beards” cut for space, that he worked with an editor to do so, and thinks “the piece they ran works nicely.”

Although he endorsed my teaching the truncated version of his essay, I still feel a tad defensive. I imagine myself writing here for serious readers and writers—so, no, I wouldn’t favor teaching an abridged edition of *Moby-Dick*. Excerpts? Maybe . . .

But the lite versions of Lethem’s and Baldwin’s essays were tailored for a different medium and for a literate but impatient audience. They fulfilled a need, just as they may in my classroom. Students will probably absorb them, in part, as unremarkable evidence of what they’ve grown up with: an ever-increasing transparency in art-making. In their time, video games and books in which the reader determines plot and outcome, such as the Choose Your Own Adventure series, have taught them the mutability of stories; movies have always come with portable DVDs offering commentary and directors’ cuts; and they’ve seen *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s first draft, a different story with a very different Atticus Finch, published as a separate new novel. As for “Notes of a Native Son” and “The Beards,” I’ll reserve the longer essays for more experienced and ambitious students. The magazine versions may help inexperienced readers and writers—in a way the book versions cannot yet help them—grasp the appeal of traditional *and* nontraditional deeply personal writing.

These essays may be teachable, as well, as palpable evidence of the frequency and nature of collaboration in literature. Though periodical editors labor anonymously, their practical, professional imperative for a measure of concision, for space and accessibility reasons, meets authors' complex work. Something new, not necessarily lesser, is created in this dialectic.