



Patrick Madden

Aliased Essayists

Whenever a nonfiction writer is caught making stuff up we in the field experience a small tremor of interest and debate, and some of us heed the call to take up our various sides of the issue. For one instance, the recent *Lifespan of a Fact* by John D'Agata and Jim Fingal, which reproduces a D'Agata essay, "What Happens There," surrounded by the dialogue between author and fact checker. In short, the original text, which deals with the suicide of Las Vegas teenager Levi Presley, includes conflated and misstated details, which Fingal discovers and attempts to right and which D'Agata defends, sometimes to the point of absurdity. Their exaggerated interchange generates within the book all sorts of interesting questions about art and veracity in nonfiction, and, after a provocative excerpt appeared in *Harper's*, generated wide-ranging dismay and outrage among the reviewing and blogging public. A number of august publications took to excoriating D'Agata (primarily; Fingal stands as readers' exasperated proxy), but Public Radio International's *To the Best of Our Knowledge* designed a show examining the question of "Writing Fiction vs. Nonfiction" for a balanced view. On that program, D'Agata explained his artistic project, stating that he was not a journalist, and exhorting that "we need to try a different sort of essaying, and then the essays become a lot more associative and they perhaps become a bit more imaginative and start taking the problematic liberties."

In response to D'Agata's claim, here I will make a brief examination of the history of the essay, which most readers nowadays think of as a rigidly nonfictional form, but which has not always been so. In any case, I prefer to think of generic distinctions as textual, not extra-textual. That is, I want to recognize *within* the words what kind of text I have found. In most cases, I haven't the time, resources, or the ability

to fact-check the literature I read largely for pleasure. And while I have a sensitive b.s. detector, I'm as likely to be deceived as any of us. So I want to understand genre, in so far as it is meaningful, as a descriptive set of identifiable characteristics *within* texts. When I'm told that a piece of published writing is "nonfiction," I have only a writer's (or publisher's) assurance that what I read attempts to capture in words something that "really happened." But I have almost no information about the piece's genre.

I should state, for the record, that my own preference for the essays I write is to utilize and select from real experience as far as I can remember or discover it. This was Montaigne's preference, too. As the first and best practitioner of the essay, he commands our respect and a measure of deference on questions of form. In "Of the force of imagination," he writes: "In the examples which I here bring in, of what I have heard, read, done, or said, I have forbidden myself to dare to alter even the most light and indifferent circumstances; my conscience does not falsify one tittle; what my ignorance may do, I cannot say." Of course, he allows for errors of memory, as do we all. And while essays are not stories, they utilize stories as they ponder ideas. In "Of three good women," Montaigne explains: "These are my three very true stories, which I find as entertaining and as tragic as any of those we make out of our own heads wherewith to amuse the common people."

So it should be clear that the essay as conceived by its creator was nonfictional. Despite Montaigne's example, though, essayists across the English Channel through the following centuries recklessly employed all sorts of fictional tricks, beginning a long tradition of essaying that has little to do with nonfiction. Jonathan Swift wrote under the guise of "Isaac Bickerstaff" to poke fun at John Partridge, a fraudulent astrologer. Joseph Addison and Richard Steele took up the Bickerstaff persona as well as others (named and unnamed) to produce their essays for the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*. Oliver Goldsmith made his essays as Lien Chi, supposedly a Chinese traveler offering his ironic observations of England. Perhaps our best-known example of an essayist not averse to making some stuff up was Charles Lamb, who lightly disguised himself as Elia, an Italian clerk whose biography often mirrored Lamb's, but

not always. He had a lot of fun with Elia, sometimes slipping in and out of character to lampoon himself. My favorite instance of this comes in “Christ’s Hospital, Five and Thirty Years Ago.” I’ll let Lamb himself explain what he did. Note that this explanation comes in a eulogy for Elia, reprinted as the preface to *The Last Essays of Elia*, written, supposedly, not by Charles Lamb, but by someone called “Phil-Elia.”

Egotistical [his essays] have been pronounced by some who did not know, that what he tells us, as of himself, was often true only (historically) of another; as in a former Essay (to save many instances)—where under the *first person* (his favourite figure) he shadows forth the forlorn estate of a country-boy placed at a London school, far from his friends and connections—in direct opposition to his own early history.

“Christ’s Hospital” was an essay that reproached Charles Lamb for his overly sunny view of the boarding school (published previously, under the author’s own name), then borrowed the forlorn Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s childhood experiences and ascribed them to Elia. I can only guess at the motivation, but it’s certain that Lamb knowingly misplaced his poet friend’s distressing youth into his own literary persona’s early life.

Phillip Lopate suggests that Charles Lamb may have written “under the phantom cloud of Elia” because he wanted to hide from his troubled past, particularly his mother’s horrific death at the hands of his older sister, Mary, who later, after a stint in the asylum, became Charles’s charge and lifelong companion, as Charles was frustrated in his attempts at courtship. Who can know why Lamb never directly engaged these sorrowful events. Some writers today would have milked the murder for all the Oprah time it most certainly would be worth.

And of course, an easy case may be made for essays that utilize fiction in a way that is not deceptive. Take, for instance, Virginia Woolf’s “Street Haunting,” whose technique is highly imaginative—she invents thoughts and backgrounds for the strangers she encounters along the way to buying a pencil. No critical reader believes that Woolf knows the details she writes. She obviously makes them up. And

what can we make of Joseph Addison writing in the voice of a shilling that has traveled the world, or of Ian Frazier, writing as one of Elizabeth Taylor's ex-husbands or as a coyote caught in New York's Central Park? The twentieth century is full of humorist-essayists (Christopher Morley, Max Beerbohm, James Thurber, David Sedaris) whose exploits often *seem* fictionalized for comic effect. Essayists have been utilizing fiction for almost as long as there have been essayists. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century British readers would not have batted an eye at most of the small changes John D'Agata made in "What Happens Here," though they may have wondered *what's the point?*

Still, a part of me resists D'Agata's cavalier dismissal of Fingal's repeated suggestions that intentional inaccuracy can be damaging. And I suspect that those same Georgian and Romantic readers and writers *would* have some troubles with certain kinds of fabrication (Leigh Hunt, who spent years in jail for his essays characterizing the crown prince, certainly understood the price of publishing disagreeable or debatable facts), so...

I'll end with a ludicrous example then some thinking from my own writing. In *Star Wars*, Grand Moff Tarkin, in an attempt to persuade Princess Leia Organa to reveal the location of the secret rebel base, and in a show of the recently completed Death Star's power, annihilates the peaceful planet of Alderaan, killing millions of inhabitants. What am I to feel about this moment? Should I grieve with the princess? Should I empathize and sorrow for the lost lives? I feel that it is hardly worth a second thought as the movie, almost without pause (Obi Wan Kenobi feels "a great disturbance in the force") proceeds to dazzle me with its action and adventure and special effects, which take precedence over a fictional planet of people a long time ago in a galaxy far away. To complete the preposterous comparison, consider the annihilation of millions of Jews or Russians or Cambodians or Rwandans, or even the torture or disappearance of only thousands of Uruguayans, and it is painfully obvious that no matter our theoretical leanings, it matters tremendously whether certain things really happened. It matters even as an exercise in probing memory, even if we cannot finally determine a

“true” rendition of events. And it can matter in ways that move beyond the assumption of duty or shared morality. It can matter in aesthetic or formal ways.

In an essay I wrote years ago, while living in Uruguay, I considered two varying stories about Tupamaro revolutionary Arturo Dubra’s grace under torture, when he bet his life against a cup of brandy and won the brandy, which his comrades consider a moral victory over the oppressive military government. What does it mean that in one version of the story Arturo was warming up for his session with his torturers by doing calisthenics and in the other version he was near death, unable to stand, barely able to speak? (Neither version was told to me by Arturo himself; each came from one of his *compañeros*.) It may mean that we aggrandize our heroes, especially in death, that we create our legends selectively and vaingloriously. Or it may mean that men who have been physically destroyed by torture tend to have memory lapses, may tend to conflate events and truly believe their composites. I have no doubt that Arturo was beaten and shocked and drowned to death’s door several times over his sixteen years in prison. Many witnesses have told me as much. And yet the man in the cell next to Arturo’s at the barracks where this famous wager was made tells me that Arturo was doing pushups and jumping jacks. In my essay, I wrote both versions, using the discrepancy to characterize Arturo, perhaps in contrast with some of his *compañeros*, by noting that he never spoke of this story. I found an opportunity to think about him and, by extension, humankind, in terms beyond the simply heroic (Arturo) or depraved (the military government).

One last example, from this same essay: In June 2003, Arturo succumbed to cancer. I grieved with his family, whom I’d come to appreciate; I also recognized the narrative potential of attending his funeral. I could end my essay by saying farewell to this great man. But the burial was far from the graceful scene I’d hoped to write. Because his coffin was to be deposited in an upper niche along the wall of the cemetery, and because there were other, older coffins sharing the spot, the municipal workers in charge of the funeral struggled long and hard on their forklift to fit the casket into its final resting place. As a friend of the deceased and as a writer, I was hoping for a smooth, peaceful end, but what we in the crowd got was a

painful, almost comedic display of mechanical difficulties, scratched heads, scrapes and jerks and jolts and creaks. Faithful to my own beliefs about writing nonfiction, I used what happened anyway, and it gave me a metaliterary moment through which to understand and interpret. In fact, it forced my mind to round out the essay in a way far more pleasing than any I could have invented narratively.

As seeming addenda to a piece that deals heavily with the 1971 Guinness World Record escape from Punta Carretas prison, these questions move the writing beyond history or biography and make it an essay, which I consider the finer form. Had I been aiming at drama or suspense, any kind of sensationalism, or if I'd wanted to fit this story to an expected arc, I would have lost the brief opportunities for meditation and reshaping forced by the constraint of writing what happened.