



Natalie Villacorta

## Autofiction: Rightly Shaped for Woman's Use

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf observes that most women writers before her time wrote novels. She offers several explanations for this trend. Women were stuck in the sitting room—a great place to observe character. They were interrupted too often to find the focus required for poetry. Additionally, “the older forms of literature were hardened and set,” with the novel alone “young enough to be soft in her hands” (76). Woolf questions, though, whether the novel is really the best form for women: “Who shall say that... even this most pliable of all forms is rightly shaped for her use? No doubt we shall find her knocking that into shape for herself when she has the free use of her limbs; and providing some new vehicle, not necessarily in verse, for the poetry in her” (76).

Of course, it wasn't just that most women wrote novels, but that nonfiction written by women was rarely published and taken seriously. As Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald, editors of *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)*, write, women's rhetoric “existed only in the shadows for centuries” (xvi). The anthology includes works that “stretch” an understanding of rhetoric, in recognition that “women have often written in unprivileged or devalued forms such as letters, journals, and speeches to the other women.” But this nonfiction—letters, newspaper columns, diary entries, stories of a personal nature—was, for a long time, not considered nonfiction. The choice women face in this situation is to conform to genre or to develop alternative means of persuasion, creating new styles and forms “in order to break out of the confines of a rhetorical tradition that they believe reinscribes women in powerless and silent positions” (xxi).

---

The devaluing of women’s nonfiction continues today, and helps to explain the current trend of autofiction, as seen in recent works like *Motherhood* by Sheila Heti, *Sight* by Jessie Greengrass, *Asymmetry* by Lisa Halliday, *Kudos* by Rachel Cusk, and *The Friend* by Sigrid Nunez, which won the 2018 National Book Award. These novels, according to Adelle Waldman, are “distinctly un-novelistic, featuring protagonists who share many biographical details (and sometimes names) with the authors, and substituting the messiness of experience for conventional plots.” Furthermore, these novels often self-consciously straddle the border between nonfiction and fiction and complicate our ideas about the relationship between form, content, and writer. “Most of what I’ve written is a kind of hybrid genre,” Sigrid Nunez said in an interview about *The Friend*. “. . .What I really like is to have elements of both [fiction and nonfiction] . . .for the stories that I want to tell, being able to draw on personal experience and invent as much as I want to lie my head off. Tell the truth and lie my head off—both ways is the way I want it.” Early examples of autofiction include *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun (1890), *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* by Rainer Maria Rilke (1910), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce (1916), and *A la recherche du temps perdu* by Marcel Proust (1920s-30s). Karl Ove Knausgaard, whose *My Struggle* series maybe the most commercially successful contemporary autofiction, often cites Hamsun and Proust as influences.

It’s this tradition—of autobiographical fiction—that I find myself, a former nonfiction writer, shifting into. Feeling that my personal nonfiction wasn’t valued, or didn’t fit in with the nonfiction I was exposed to, I started to write fiction. In fiction, specifically autofiction, I saw examples of exactly what I wanted to do: personal writing, heavy on scene/narrative. The content of my fiction was largely the same as my nonfiction—drawing on my life experiences—only the label was different. In fiction, I feel that I can write about what I’m interested in—the personal, the domestic, the mundane—without being questioned, without being asked: why are you writing about this? What’s the meaning of it, what’s the point? Aren’t there more important stories to tell? Dorothy Allison speaks of her writing process similarly: “Throw in some real stuff, change a few details, add the certainty of outrage. I know the use of fiction in a world of

---

hard truth, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth.” Fiction, Allison is saying, can often be a better vehicle for the truth than nonfiction.

And perhaps this turn to fiction also represents the anxiety amongst nonfiction writers that nonfiction is not considered art, which can be traced back to the genre’s “odor of disesteem,” as William Deresiewicz puts it in his critique of John D’Agata’s essay anthology. Or perhaps it also reflects an awareness of the publishing industry. None of the major New York houses want to buy essay collections, because they don’t sell. And this is true whether you’ve already published a book or are coming straight out of an MFA program. A former professor of mine, whose debut memoir was published by a major press and received a number of accolades, has been focusing his energies on a novel, after struggling to sell an essay collection. Because just turning to fiction doesn’t solve the publishing problem. Short story collections, like essay collections, are a tough sell. But novels—and non-fiction that reads like novels—sell.

So is autofiction the form “rightly shaped” for woman’s use that Woolf was anticipating? Is it the “new vehicle” for the poetry within her? Some might argue that the vehicle Woolf was searching for to represent the experience and story of women is the lyric essay. Though the form is not exactly new—it was just named in 1997, not invented. You can make the case, for example, that 11<sup>th</sup> Century Japanese writer Sei Shonagon’s lists of observations from the Empress’s court were lyric essays. Still, as Amy Bonnaffons, in *The Essay Review*, points out, the naming of the form has been useful; giving it greater visibility and allowing writers to write into the form. Many of those writers, as Bonnaffons notes, are women, including “Maggie Nelson, Jenny Boully, Susan Griffin, Anne Carson, Eula Biss, Mary Ruefle, Brenda Miller.” She suggests that this is because the form is suited to writing about the body, and women often write about the body because for women, it is difficult to forget that we are bodies:

The lyric essay, with its associative logic and its openness to viscosity as a tool of meaning-making, may in fact be more suitable than other forms for expressing embodied truths—especially those

---

previously neglected, those experienced in the gaps between sanctioned 'facts.' It may offer unique tools for expressing the presence of absences.

Despite this observation of women's penchant for the lyric essay, Bonnaffons writes, "The last thing I want to do is suggest some kind of easy relationship between gender and literary form, to argue that women are predisposed to write in a certain way." She is uninterested in proving that the lyric essay is a "female" genre: "to do so would be to essentialize, and to run the risk of ghettoizing." Still, she acknowledges the connection between form and identity, and her discussion of women's writing about the body recalls the words of feminist theorist Helene Cixous, who urged women to write through their bodies: "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth," she writes (338). In the lyric essay, women have found a way to write through their bodies.

Beyond being friendly to the body, there are other aspects of the lyric essay that feminist theorists would praise. Indeed, comparing the characteristics of the lyric essay as described by Deborah Tall and John D'Agata in the Fall 1997 issue of *Seneca Review* to the writing of many feminist theorists and the virtues they hailed, there are many overlaps: discursive logic, a mingling of genres, the inclusion of the words of others, an embrace of complexity, an intimate voice, the use of metaphor. I'd argue that "Commitment from the Mirror Writing Box" by Trinh T. Min-ha, for example, is a lyric essay. The essay consists of several titled sections, the first called "The triple bind" on her struggle to determine which of her identities was primary—woman, person of color, or writer—then, in "Silence in time," she discusses the time writing requires, and therefore the privilege of it— moves to "The guilt" that comes from writing—then to "Freedom and the masses" on the question of what to write: "functional writing" or art for art's sake writing—on to how to write ("Vertically imposed language: on clarity, craftsmanship, and She who steals language")—and ends up, in the final section on "Writing woman," discussing theory. This trajectory is consistent with that of the lyric essay: Tall and D'Agata note that the lyric essay starts somewhere and

ends up elsewhere, “an arrival that might still leave the writer questioning”—and, along the way, the essayist moves by association, meanders, makes leaps, accreting in fragments, with gaps in between. This is precisely what Min-ha does, as well as mingling genre, engaging with facts, embracing complexity, and using poetic language—just like a lyric essayist.

And yet, the lyric essay, as a form, presents its own challenges. Most people, most writers, even, would struggle to define what a lyric essay is. This may be because, for some, the associative logic, the fragmentation, the complexity, and the resistance to narrative are difficult to follow. In autofiction, women writers can do what they can do in lyric essay—write through their bodies, move by association, embrace gaps, take detours, include the voices of others and other genres, write intimately and lyrically—but thanks to the label of “fiction” and to narrative, this form of writing can find a larger audience. Autofiction becomes the form that results when fiction writers recognize that life is complex and full of gaps, that objectivity is a myth.

Take *Motherhood* by Sheila Heti, for example.

This novel—about a woman’s struggle to decide whether to have a baby—suggests that writing about the body is at home in autofiction as it is in the lyric essay. The narrator is constantly telling us what it feels like to be in her body: “I am too tired to keep writing this—drained, depressed, worn through. Thinking about children weakens my fingers and puts me in a deep sleep” (180). Throughout the book, bodily experiences are described: the narrator writes about an abortion she had, sex with her boyfriend, getting an IUD. The later sections of the book are even titled after the phases of the menstrual cycle: “Bleeding,” “Follicular,” “Ovulating,” “PMS.”

The mingling of genres found in some lyric essays is essential to autofiction, with many authors, including Heti, intentionally blurring the lines between autobiography and fiction. Much about *Motherhood* encourages the reader to read the narrator as the author. The narrator is a female writer in her late 30s living in Toronto, like Heti—which the reader can learn from a glance at the writer’s biography at the back

of the novel. Further encouraging an autobiographical reading is the self-reflexivity of the narrator: “This will be a book to prevent future tears—to prevent me and my mother from crying. . . . I know it’s not the job of a child to stop her mother from crying, but I’m not a child anymore. I’m a writer. The change I have undergone from child to writer, gives me powers” (14). Furthermore, the narrator looks like Heti: on page 63 is a selfie of the narrator, a photo she took her reflection in a mirror. The person in the photo resembles Heti, whose author photo is included on the novel’s flyleaf. In suggesting that the narrator is the author, the novel suggests that its content came from the life of a real woman (Heti’s first novel’s subtitle was: *A novel from life*). Thus, validating the experiences described therein. But fiction allows Heti to make things up as she pleases.

In engaging with real texts and real paintings, *Motherhood* also behaves like a lyric essay. Reproductions of several paintings are included in the text, including Gauguin’s “Vision After the Sermon.” Throughout the text, the narrator consults a version of the *I Ching*—“a divination system that originated in China over three thousand years ago. Kings used it in times of war, and regular people used it to help them with life problems,” according to a note at beginning of the book. Whenever she has a question—such as, “Can a woman who makes books be let off the hook by the universe for not making the living thing called babies?”—she flips three coins and if there are two or three heads, the answer is yes; if instead there are two or three tails, the answer is no. In addition to referencing the *I Ching*, she cites the Bible. The story of Jacob Wrestling the Angel from the Old Testament is one of the influences on her thinking about whether to become a mother. “So the point is not to strengthen oneself from the struggle, or to win, but to overcome?” she asks the coins (58). The narrator then reads a commentary about the story, which further evolves her understanding and further illustrates her reliance on earlier texts: “Jacob was wrestling with himself—with his new self,” she writes, concluding that by the end of the struggle, his physical and spiritual selves were no longer at odds (65). From this, the narrator realizes she must trust “whatever the

universe brings” (67). The novel ends with an allusion to this story: “Then I named this wrestling place *Motherhood*, for here is where I saw God face-to-face and yet my life was spared.”

While *Motherhood* shares many characteristics with the lyric essay, the major way it departs into autofiction is in its embrace of narrative. This narrative helps the reader to follow the twists and turns, leaps and digressions, of the narrator’s mind. In her journey to decide whether she ought to have a child, the narrator moves back and forth on the question. Different experiences push her towards one stance or another: “On the one hand, the joy of children. On the other hand, the misery of them. On the one hand, the freedom of not having children. On the other hand, the loss of never having had them,” she writes (19). She will often leap from one subject to another: from talking about her feelings “So many feelings in a day. It’s clearly not the rudder—not the oracle—not the thing you should steer your life by” (10) to discussing her mother, a hardworking, depressed doctor (“My mother cried for forty days and forty nights” (13)).

This restless thought process is maybe how our thinking works—our brains don’t consider all the pros for something, then all the cons, then make concessions and counterarguments, as we composition teachers teach our students to do—but is still difficult to follow. The narrative grounds the reader in the narrator’s body—her tiredness, her aches—in scene, in the places where her thinking is taking place, giving us the sounds and sights around her, the people around her. Heti develops recurring characters who speak to the narrator and influence her thinking, who accompany her on this journey. Without this story, the reader surely would have become exhausted by the narrator’s deliberations. While the lyric essay “[forsakes]” narrative, the autobiographical novel recognizes that it’s often needed to keep a reader engaged, that it helps communicate ideas (“Narrative has never been merely entertainment for me. It is, I believe, one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge,” said Toni Morrison).

This use of narrative to aid a reader in following a train of thought is just what Virginia Woolf does in *A Room of One’s Own*, in fact. At the start of the speech, Woolf proposes using “of all the liberties

---

and licenses of a novelist” to tell her audience how she arrived at the idea that a woman needed a room of her own and 500 a year to write fiction. “Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact,” she wrote (4). She then goes on to tell the story of the two October days she spends trying to come to a conclusion on the subject of women and fiction. She visits the fictional universities of Oxbridge and Fernham, reflecting on the different educational opportunities available to men and women. Then she visits the British Museum in London, perusing books written by men about women. Then she consults the books on her own shelves—first history books—to learn about the lives of Elizabethan women—then the writing of women before her time, observing that 19<sup>th</sup> century women writers all wrote novels—and finally, books by living women writers, finding that women were still writing novels, but with a difference: they depicted complicated women in complicated relationships with other women (81). As her mind twists and turns, these twists and turns are mirrored in the physical journey that she takes, making her thought process easier to follow.

Woolf’s creation of scenes through sensory detail aids the reader in following her thought process—the abstract is turned concrete. She begins the story of her research process by describing her surroundings: “Here then was I...sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought. That collar I have spoken of, women and fiction...bowed my head to the ground. To the right and left bushes of some sort, golden and crimson, glowed with the colour, even it seemed burnt with the heat, of fire” (5). These sensory details allow the reader to enter the scene, and thus, better enter Woolf’s mind.

Woolf constructs events in the story that illustrate her ideas, which increases their persuasiveness. For example, after thinking by the river, and coming up with a “little fish” of a thought, she walks across the campus of Oxbridge and is quickly interrupted by a figure walking towards her, gesturing angrily, because she, as a woman, is not permitted on the turf that she walks on. The figure interrupts Woolf’s train of thought: “The only charge I could bring against the Fellows and Scholars of whatever the college



might happen to be was that in protection of their turf...they had sent my little fish into hiding” (6). A similar interruption occurs when she reaches the door of the library and is barred from entry because she is a woman. This interruption of her thoughts illustrates her claim about the difficulty that women face in thinking and writing when they do not have rooms of their own. These events—plot points in fiction terms—allow Woolf to illustrate her ideas, thus making them even more convincing.

Much of Woolf’s argument comes from what she reads, but watching someone else read can be boring, and Woolf solves this problem by dramatizing her reading process. “To begin with, I ran my eye up and down the page,” Woolf begins the section on reading contemporary women’s novels, specifically *Life’s Adventure* by Mary Carmichael (79). By describing her reading process in physical terms, Woolf turns reading into a story, something passive into something active. “To read this writing was like being out at sea in an open boat,” she writes (79). But then she catches herself making a hasty judgement: “Wait a moment, I said, leaning back in my chair, I must consider the whole thing more carefully before I go any further” (80). By telling us that she leans back in her chair, the reader can see her intellectual struggle manifested in action, which more firmly impresses it on the mind of the reader. She then tells us how she turns the page, lets her mind wander from the book, “[hovers] at a little distance above the page,” and finally, puts the book back on the shelf: “She will be a poet, I said, putting *Life’s Adventure*, by Mary Carmichael, at the end of the shelf, in another hundred years’ time” (93). Here, Woolf shows us that reading is not just an intellectual activity, but a physical activity—she does not just write through her body, she reads through it. By turning reading into an action, she keeps the reader engaged.

By presenting her argument as a story—complete with a story’s scenes, sensory details, conflicts, and actions—Woolf aids the reader in following her train of thought, and if the reader can follow her train of thought, then surely the reader will be more likely to be convinced of her argument. Woolf herself admits that her thinking is difficult to follow: “I spare you the twists and turns of my cogitations,”

she writes, at one point, which is ironic, because she often does not spare us (15). But, she makes them easier to follow by leading us through a physical, if fictional, world.

Here we see Woolf writing through her body, combining elements of fiction and nonfiction—elements I have identified in autofiction. And so, in the piece of writing in which Woolf questioned what the form rightly shaped for woman's use was, she stumbled upon one—autofiction, which she did not invent, but made smart use of and, in doing so, passed on to other women writers, such as Heti and myself.

## Works Cited

- Allison, Dorothy. "from Two or Three Things I Know for Sure." *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)*, edited by Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001, pp. 435-53.
- Anzaldua, Gloria. "Gloria Anzaldua." *Critical Intellectuals on Writing*, edited by Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham, SUNY Press, 2003, pp. 15-30.
- Bonnaffons, Amy. "Bodies of Text: On the Lyric Essay." *The Essay Review*. <http://theessayreview.org/bodies-of-text-on-the-lyric-essay/>. Accessed 10 Nov. 2018.
- Anzaldua, Gloria. "Speaking in Tongues." *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherrie L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldua, Third Woman Press, 2002, pp. 182-193.
- Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, Rutgers UP, 1991, pp.334-49.
- D'Agata, John, and Deborah Tall. "The Lyric Essay." *Seneca Review*, Fall 2007. <https://www.hws.edu/senecareview/lyricessay.aspx>. Accessed 9 December 2018.
- Heti, Sheila. *Motherhood*. New York, Henry Holt, 2018.
- Kumar, Amitava. *Immigrant, Montana*, New York, Knopf, 2018.
- Min-ha, Trinh-T. *Woman, Native, Other*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989, pp. 5-44.
- Morrison, Toni. "The Nobel Lecture in Literature." *Available Means: An Anthology of Women's Rhetoric(s)*, edited by Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001, pp. 416-23.
- Waldman, Adelle. "'An Answer to the Novel's Detractors.'" *The New Yorker*. 2 Dec. 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/novels-detractors>. Accessed 3 Dec. 2018.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*, Orlando, Harcourt, 2018.