STRETCHING THE TRUTH: LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN EDUCATION

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In *Religion and American Education*, Warren Nord grapples with one of the most difficult aspects of teaching religion: how to help American students, whose religious literacy tends to be severely impoverished, understand religious experience. While Nord's overall goal is to incorporate the critical examination of religion into the curriculum as a whole, he argues that any serious endeavor to do this cannot exclude teaching the personal aspects of faith and belief: "If we truly want to understand religion, if we want to take it seriously, then we must…open our hearts to religious experience,"[1] he writes. Unless we help students get "inside" religion, we fail to take it seriously as a discipline, and, thus, fail to open productive dialogue among a diverse and democratic citizenship.[2] Getting inside religion, however, is a tricky pedagogical feat, as we don't want to coerce students into attending a church or religious service.[3] We therefore need to find a "substitute" for religious experience, and it is Nord's pedagogical proposal here that I find particularly interesting. He writes that "The best substitute for firsthand personal religious experience is autobiographical or literary accounts of such experience."[4] Narrative language, he claims, "has the power to recreate experiences," which allows us access to the emotional parts of religion.[5] Nord goes on to call out autobiography in particular, separating it from literary narratives and grouping it with apology, scripture, and theology. He stipulates that like these latter three genres, autobiography "may not operate imaginatively" but still "gives students a sense of what it is to think religiously."[6]

I find Nord's argument in support of religious education provocative and important. While his proposal to assign autobiography as part of religious education comprises only a small part of his overall study, I want to take it seriously, in part because it is a genre frequently proposed by other educational theorists to accomplish a variety of pedagogical aims. In a recent article, James Southworth encourages assigning autobiographical texts as a method of bringing

[1] Warren Nord, *Religion and American Education* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 218.
[2] Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 235.
[3] Nord, 218.
[4] Nord, 219.
[5] Nord, 219.
[6] Nord, 220.

students to a state of productive doubt.[7] Hub Zwart suggests in a 2015 article that science autobiographies can be useful for better understanding nuances about life sciences research.[8] I wholeheartedly agree with these scholars, as well as with Nord, that reading autobiography can be a powerful and productive way to improve student learning in a variety of contexts. However, it is out of my admiration for this complex literary genre that I also want to qualify the uses to which it is put in educational contexts.[9] I argue that there are two main limitations with assigning autobiography as a tool to teach something outside the context of the literature classroom. The limitations include the following: first, assuming that autobiography can be assigned as a conduit for affective experience precludes attention to its generic boundaries and affordances, which threatens and limits any pedagogical aim. Second, using one person's personal narrative to represent a religion's experiential aspects can distort the understanding of the religion as a whole. In order to ground the discussion, I weave autobiographical theory throughout my argument. I conclude with a brief consideration of how these arguments might be extrapolated for educators who want to use autobiography to teach content or skills in non-literary disciplines.

THE LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES OF GENRE

The first problem I identify—teaching autobiography without attention to genre—immediately requires a clarification on the literary status of autobiography. Nord actually separates autobiography from literature, grouping it with non-literary genres such as apology and theology,[10] and then states that these genres "may not operate imaginatively."[11] These two tenets—that autobiography is non-imaginative and non-literary—comprise a common misunderstanding of the genre. Although autobiography studies as a discipline has done much since the publication of Nord's book to establish autobiography's generic particularities and its literary status, its literary qualities are still often ignored or misunderstood. The risk of ignoring autobiography's literary status and generic features is that it will be mistakenly read as a transparent, historical, and factual record of someone's life. But autobiography should be read not as biographical fact but as literature, with all its attendant slippery relations to truth. As long-time autobiography scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson remark, "To reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it of the densities of

[7] James Southworth, "Bridging Critical Thinking and Transformative Learning: The Role of Perspective-Taking," *Theory and Research in Education* 20, no. 1 (2022): 44-63.

[8] Hub Zwart, "The Third Man: Comparative Analysis of a Science Autobiography and a Cinema Classic As Windows into Post-War Life Sciences Research," *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 37, no.4 (2015): 328-412.

[9] In this paper, I focus only on the pedagogical implications of reading autobiographical texts, rather than writing them (about which much more has been written).

[10] It could be argued that some apology is literary as well, but Nord here seems to be referencing critical apologist arguments.

[11] Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 220.

rhetorical, literary, ethical, political, and cultural dimensions."[12] So what makes autobiography a nonfiction genre that should be read with a distinct, literary framework rather than through a purely historical or factual lens?

To be sure, the boundaries between literary nonfiction and general, non-literary nonfiction are blurry and imperfect; nonfiction genres might be more productively understood along a spectrum of literariness rather than divided by hard lines. Those that are typically considered less literary, like newspaper journalism or history textbooks, employ fewer literary devices; employ facts for information-driven and knowledge-proving rhetorical purposes; and have a narrator who is placed farther outside the main action of the text. Those that are more literary, like autobiography, essays, and literary journalism, engage a broader range of literary devices, such as metaphor, characterization, allusions, imagery, and irony; employ facts for a multitude of rhetorical purposes, from self-justification to self-knowledge to creating shared meanings of a life; and have a narrator who is placed within or close to the action of the text. Judged along this spectrum, autobiography is a distinct, literary genre because of how it employs facts in pursuit of subjective "truth;" because of its systematic incorporation of literary devices not as mere dressing to the narrative, but as an integral part of the structural whole; and because it involves a host of narrative complexities due to the autobiographical "I." Some of these generic features will be discussed more in depth below; for now, they point to the fact that autobiographical narratives are complex, literary texts, and, as such, they "require reading practices that engage the narrative tropes, sociocultural contexts, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts" that this genre entails.[13] Misunderstanding autobiography as a straightforward, nonliterary, unimaginative record may predispose someone to read it as such, neglecting the necessary interpretive frameworks that all literature demands.

All this said, however, if our primary goal in teaching autobiography is to invite students to "get inside" religion, why should it matter in this particular educational context that autobiography achieves literary status or has generic conventions at all? In light of Nord's goal, it might seem like the less we use a literary framework to understand a text, the better. Put another way, if our primary goal is to *experience* a text—to feel the emotive power of it—then the critical distance that a literary interpretive approach necessitates seems antithetical, one that invites distance and analysis rather than emotion and feeling. I argue, though, that in educational contexts, it is both unlikely and undesirable that students engage in the affective appreciation of a text without the complementary act of critiquing it. A student reader is always going to approach a text with some sort of framework, because the educational context in which it is assigned is itself a framework through which they read. Educational

[12] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 13.
[13] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 13.

contexts prime students to read for a purpose: students often (even if misguidedly) read to "find meaning" or to note answers to a teacher's preformed questions. Thus, a student almost always encounters an assigned text with an agenda, even if that agenda is formed from unconscious assumptions. And even if, in private reading, a student experiences a text more emotionally than analytically, once it becomes the topic of discussion and interpretation in the classroom, the student is drawn into a critical approach. It would be rare, then, if a teacher assigned literature with no expectation beyond a student's experiential encounter with it. Moreover, it would be problematic to do so because the experience we may have with an assigned work of literature is not the end goal. Instead, the end goal is usually more related to the ability to think critically, a crucial aspect of liberal education. Nord's project is sympathetic to critical thinking, as he places his own goal of getting inside religion as a necessary part of the much larger project of holistic religious education. In fact, he advances the notion that productive critique and analysis include the consideration of personal experience. Students have to both experience *and* critique religion in order "to make judgments, to conclude, however tentatively, that some ways of thinking and living are better or worse than others."[14] It seems correct, then, that while the primary goal in assigning autobiography is to get students to appreciate the affective domains of religion, it would be both improbable and disagreeable if this were the sole outcome of a student reading a book like Augustine's *Confessions*. We might want them to feel, along with Augustine, the intensity of remorse and the spiritual deliberation that led to conversion, but to complete the pedagogical project, we would certainly want students to do more: to reflect on Augustine's experiences and interpretations, and on their own reaction to the text. Using an appropriate literary framework provides them with tools for productive reflection.

To recap briefly, I've established that autobiography is a distinct, literary genre, and have argued that when students read literature, they both experience the narrative as well as critique the narrative. Assuming that both of these arguments stand, we arrive at the pedagogical limitations incurred when autobiography is assigned with the misguided assumption that it can be taught exclusively, or even primarily, for the purpose of conveying the affective domains of religion (or any subject). When we teach a book assuming the affective experience of reading is sufficient for our larger goals, we neglect to critically engage the unique features of autobiography. Without engaging these features, autobiography is more likely to be read as a transparent narrative of a personal, historical past, rather than as a genre with particular affordances and boundaries that contribute to the meaning-making strategies of the text.

Reading autobiography without attention to these generic conventions limits and problematizes the pedagogical project, because genre is a crucial framework in literary analysis. In her groundbreaking work on genre theory, Carolyn Miller argues in "Genre as Social Action" that genre is more than just a

[14] Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 201.

set of conventions; it is rhetorically and socially motivated, and examining various genres' rhetorical features can help us understand our historical and cultural moment.[15] Genre theory as a discipline has much more to say about this idea, but the salient point here is that genre matters when assigning autobiography, even when our aim lies outside of genre studies, like when we want students to get a sense of what it is to feel and think religiously. Unless we engage the autobiographical genre as a critical framework, we risk reading the text superficially, with attention only for the main storyline and emotional resonances, instead of considering how and why the affective experience is created for the reader, and what social actions the text may be making. Finally, as a genre that claims a higher truth value than fiction, autobiography might justify an even greater demand on our critical attention than genres that do not make claims to truth—particularly in our present post-truth age. After all, while we certainly do want to open our minds and hearts to the perspectives of others, we also don't want to accept all perspectives uncritically. In neglecting a generic framework when we assign autobiography, we have a far greater risk of our students encountering the text at a superficial level (limiting the pedagogical project), or, at worst, having them misread and misconstrue a text (threatening the pedagogical project).

To avoid these limitations, teaching with autobiography necessitates an appropriate generic framework to guide students' interpretations of the text. First, autobiography needs to be viewed as an imaginative, literary genre, rather than a factual, historical record. In an educational context like Nord's, where autobiography is assigned to help students understand religious experience, reading the genre without attention to its literary form introduces immediate problems. After all, reading the Bible as a record of fact results in very different outcomes than reading it as literature. While hardly an equally extreme case, something similar can be said for autobiography. In this genre, an author does not offer their religious experiences with the sole purpose of getting their readers to feel what they felt. They offer experiences as part of a larger argument of why they stayed, or left, or converted into a religious tradition—in other words, they make an argument as to what their past *means*; and they make it within the conventions of a socially-situated genre. If we consider the difference of assigning autobiography as a nonimaginative text about one person's religious experience, and assigning an autobiography as an artistic negotiation of subjective truth that makes use of certain generic affordances, we begin to see how different the outcomes are for student readers. The reader, in focusing on an autobiography as a record of "what happened," minimizes it as a narrative of interpretation. This reader may view the narrated experiences as raw material, rather than as memories that have been selected, interpreted, negotiated, and presented for maximum rhetorical effect. We might compare this to reading a

[15] Carolyn Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (May 1984): 151-167.

common history textbook, where even when "what happened" can be verified by eyewitness accounts, an interpretive stance colors every sentence and, yet is often imperceivable to an unpracticed eye. Perspective becomes encoded within the text and taken as *the* perspective, *the* way of knowing, while other viewpoints and interpretations are invisible or ignored. A reader may overestimate the autobiography's truth value, not recognizing the interpretative stances, cultural and historical discourses, and literary frameworks within which the narrative operates. This is to say that the content and the form of any text are inseparable; when religious autobiographies are mistaught and misread, it is often because the content is either separated from the form, or the form is misconstrued. Form and content are inextricably linked and should be taught as interconnected and interdependent, and read for the ways they shape each other.

To exemplify both the importance of exploring the generic conventions when teaching autobiography and the necessity of connecting form and content, I'll take a brief look at the concept of autobiographical truth. Autobiographical truth is one of the most unique and important aspects of autobiography, a theoretical concept of the genre the exploration of which opens up possibilities to enhance student learning when assigning a text like a religious autobiography. Truth in autobiography is premised on what Philip Lejeune has called an "autobiographical pact" that exists between author and reader.[16] The basic concept of this pact is that it promises the reader that the author on the cover is the same person as both the narrator and the protagonist in the text; and that the reader can trust that the story is "true." When public scandals concerning autobiography break out, the anger from audiences is a reaction to this pact being broken—the author has often fabricated huge lies and claimed them as truth. This autobiographical pact affects our reading of the text, sometimes in the direction of the above-mentioned misunderstanding: we read with the assumption that what we are reading is factual and/or true. But autobiographical truth is one of the genre's most elastic affordances: while the pact fairly promises truth to a reader, it also invites readers to adjust their expectations about truth itself. Rather than ensuring fact or transparency, the pact actually urges readers to ask: to what kind of truth do we expect the author's fidelity? The truth of biographical fact? An honest account of self-understanding? A fair representation of their cultural and historical moment? A faithful narration of their memories? And what does it mean for a reader's understanding of truth when the honestly told remembrance of an event cannot be verified by other witnesses? What does it mean when an autobiographer knowingly employs lies and fictions in the pursuit of truth, as Lauren Slater does in her memoir *Lying*? How is truth status affected when facts are massaged and tweaked in order to better convey the author's meaning, a

[16] Phillippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Pact," in *The Routledge Auto|Biography Studies Reader*, ed. Ricia Anne Chancy and Emily Hipchen (New York, NY: Routledge, [1975] 2016): 34-48.

technique writer John D'Agata describes as "taking liberties," and his fact-checker Jim Fingal calls "telling lies?"[17]

In answer to some of these questions, Smith and Watson theorize autobiographical truth not as a confirmation or invalidation of objective truth, but, instead, as residing "in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life."[18] In other words, truth in autobiography is arrived at not by the writer alone, but by the engagement of the reader in the truth claims and truth-making strategies of the narrative. To arrive at this shared understanding of a life, both reader and writer must engage in interpretation. This is why the autobiographical pact must not be accepted passively or uncritically by readers, as is done when reading the genre as non-literary or solely for the aim of feeling the writer's experience; instead, the pact needs to be actively engaged. The content of autobiography is purportedly true and factual, but it is the *form* of autobiography that constructs the very concept of truth. Attention to the interplays of truth, narrative, and intersubjective exchange primes students to view the text as an artistic, literary argument, which will allow them to read for encoded patterns of belief.

These encoded patterns of belief underly the autobiographical text not only in the interplays of truth but also through the narrator's relation of experience. Recall that Nord proposed autobiographical narratives as "the best substitute for firsthand personal religious experience,"[19] because getting students to experience religion non-coercively was one of the most important elements of a religious curriculum for Nord. But experience, like truth, cannot be taken at face value in an autobiographical narrative. Smith and Watson suggest that experience in an autobiographical narrative "is already an interpretation of the past and of our place in a culturally and historically specific moment."[20] It is, in other words, what we use to constitute ourselves as subjects. In addition, because autobiography is a kind of artistic argument that claims high truth value, narrators have a stake in persuading their readers that their experience is authoritative in some way. A student reading autobiography would benefit from considering how a narrator constructs identity and authority through their written interpretation of the past. In this way, students can be introduced to the nuances of experience as a concept: the claims to authority it makes, the ways cultural and personal discourses of interpretation affect both the experiences we have and our assignation of meaning to those experiences. When we use an autobiography to teach religious experience in particular, discussing the nature of experience itself is just as important as teaching the religious dimensions of it. Autobiography read within its generic features, then, invites students to explore the nuances and complexities of both truth and experience. Part of what I want to suggest here is that when Nord claims autobiography as the best substitute for

[17] John D'Agata and Jim Fingal, *The Lifespan of a Fact* (New York, NY: Norton, 2012).
[18] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 16.
[19] Nord, *Religion and American Education*, 219.
[20] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 31.

religious experience, he stopped short of exploring just how much it could teach a student about religion. Personal narratives allow us a window into other people's experiences, but they also invite us to critique the very ideas of truth and experience—two concepts that are elemental in the study of religion.

THE LIMITATIONS OF REPRESENTATION

The last qualification I would like to offer when assigning autobiography to teach religious experience is that using one person's personal narrative to stand in for the religious experience of an entire sect can distort the understanding of the religion as a whole. To illustrate this, I'll look briefly at two autobiographies written in recent years about the Mormon faith. In 2019, Tara Westover's *Educated* was published about growing up in a fundamentalist Mormon family; her personal and educational experiences led her to leave religion completely. In 2012, Joanna Brooks's *Book of Mormon Girl* told the story of a more traditional Mormon experience and the author's complicated relationship with her faith, which she chose to remain close to despite her reservations. The same year, Ayse Hitchins's memoir *The Worth of a Soul* came out through a Mormon publisher, detailing the spiritual experiences that led her to convert from Islam to Mormonism. While each book may represent each author's honest experience of being part of the same faith, they also each leave large holes in the treatment of Mormon religious experience. Reading one of these memoirs might accomplish Nord's primary aim: a student can feel, along with Brooks, a cathartic influence of prayer, or with Westover, a sense of expansiveness on leaving. While these are potentially valuable readings, they are also limiting. To represent Mormon religious experience through only one of these perspectives necessarily neglects a range of experiences that constitute other possibilities of how it feels to be Mormon. For readers who know little about the Mormon faith, they may walk away with a distorted, partial view of the varieties of experience within this complex religion.

In addition to the limitations of representation inherent to the genre of autobiography, the publishing industry itself further problematizes comprehensive representation. The very selection of narratives an educator can choose from is limited from the start—by who chooses to write them, who chooses to publish them, and then by the various mechanisms in the publishing world that gatekeep, edit, and promote them. Often, the more sensational and uncommon someone's religious experience, the more likely it is to not only find a publisher but also to make it on to bestseller lists, which skews the available narratives of religious experience toward the unusual.[21]

While educators cannot control the selection of available autobiographies, one possible avenue to provide a more complex view of religious experience is to offer multiple perspectives through a variety of

[21] For a full discussion of the complexities of publishers' production of memoirs, see Julie Rak, *Boom!: Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Waterloo, UK: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013).

works—several excerpts of different books, for example, or an array of personal essays about religious experience. Beyond offering a greater variety of experiences, this approach also invites students to contrast and compare both the experiences being conveyed as well as the interpretations the authors forward. Another way to avoid this limitation and use autobiography to its fullest extent to teach religious experience is to again look at the generic conventions of autobiography. In this case, examining the construction of the narrative self in particular will allow a student to tease apart the narrator's individual experience and the representation of the group to which the author claims belonging. Asking students to consider how a narrator constructs their subjectivity—the ways they portray their thoughts and actions, the justifications they offer, the tone and language they use—invites students to consider how textual strategies offer a specific representation of both the narrator and the religious group.

Charles Altieri notes that when it comes to autobiographical subjectivity, there is an all-too-common impulse in autobiographers to "compose versions of a self…that will confirm [their] reality as desirable."[22] In other words, autobiographers employ moral vocabularies, and often ones that emphasize productive conversion (whether towards a religion or away from it) and the triumph of will over circumstances. Situated in an educational setting, students may pick up on these moral vocabularies readily, primed as they are to read books for didactic lessons rather than for aesthetic value or literary nuance. Religious autobiographies in particular are prone to this danger of making a narrator's choices look desirable, as they may be motivated to justify a conversion of some kind. A student reader should learn to look critically at the narrator, to determine how they use these moral vocabularies in constructing the self: what interpretations they employ, what arguments are they making about themselves, about experience, about the individual writ large. Reading in this critical fashion takes emphasis off the narrator as representative of a religion, and places emphasis on what Altieri calls the "qualities of consciousness" that an autobiographer employs.[23] Ultimately, Altieri sees these qualities of consciousness as one of the most promising features of autobiography, because a narrator who has an open, introspective stance towards experience can "stay open to the import of those experiences."[24] This is something we might hope our students, too, are able to do as they consider the complexities of religious experience. As they read autobiography to feel, understand, and critique religious experience, we can hope they adopt the productive, conscientious stances that effective autobiographers take toward their own lives: to consider, appreciate, and evaluate experience, but also to remain open to its meaning, interpretations, and limitations.

[22] Charles Altieri, "Autobiography and the Limits of Moral Criticism," in *The Routledge Auto|Biography Studies Reader*, ed. Ricia Anne Chansky and Emily Hipchen (New York, NY: Routledge): 224.
[23] Altieri, "Autobiography," 227.
[24] Altieri, 227.

While the observations and arguments I've offered here speak to considerations in teaching religion, they can be extrapolated to any course of study that assigns an autobiography as a way of teaching something other than literary principles. A course in counseling, for example, might assign a memoir about grief for a purpose similar to Nord's: to offer students an opportunity to read about loss to better understand and appreciate an important experience of human life. The possibilities here for students are great: they can feel empathy or compassion, examine human expressions of grief, imagine possibilities for counseling interventions, and more. But the limitations of autobiography are equally important. Not all experiences of grief are alike, and students may benefit from a variety of grief narratives in order to understand nuanced differences. Similarly, reading within genre frameworks is important: without discussing how the narrativization of grief constructs the experience of it, or what kinds of autobiographical truths and moral vocabularies are at stake, students might miss important subtleties about how the narrator presents both themselves and larger arguments about grief and healing.

If we can assign autobiography with attention to both its literary generic affordances and its limitations of large-scale representation, then I believe it has the potential to be an incredible pedagogical tool. Perhaps this is especially true when it comes to teaching about religious experience. Not only because autobiography allows an inside view of personal experience in a way few other genres can, but for another, more interesting reason as well: assessing the truth claims of an autobiographical narrative is not unlike wrestling with some aspects of religious truth. Like autobiography, religion makes truth claims through specific narratives and interpretative frameworks to arrive at an overarching meaning of life. An important aspect of personal religious experience, and a fundamental tenet of the academic discipline of religion, is negotiating the meaning that emerges from truth claims that cannot be verified. And negotiating that meaning religiously often involves an intersubjective exchange between religious practitioner and a person or object of religious authority. While it is certainly stretching the metaphor too far to say that reading autobiography is akin to reading scripture (though Nord himself lumps these together), it does seem that when students of autobiography take on the challenge of adjusting their expectations of truth, they are engaging in parallel with a common type of religious experience: asking what truth is, how it can be known, on whose authority it is considered truth, and, perhaps most importantly, how it changes their ways of being in the world. Unlike fiction—which invites the suspension of belief—autobiography asks every reader to believe, to adjust our expectations of belief, and, finally, to interpret our lives accordingly.