



*The Truth, Lies, and
Language Games
of Cultural Limina:
Writing Literature
in the Breach*

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The first few years of the 21st century have given rise to a literary fascination with prose that pushes against the boundaries and borders of genre and steers itself toward a place where the short story and the essay, or fiction and nonfiction, co-mingle and borrow freely from one another in terms of structure, language, content, and the more difficult and complex variables of reader expectation and matters of factuality. At the same time,

there has been a series of “truth wars” amongst the literati, as best-selling works of literary nonfiction are exposed as being heavily fictionalized, prompting an exasperated public to react in anger and disgust. A piece published in *The New Yorker* earlier this year, written by Jill Lepori, addresses this cultural rift by exploring the relationship between the historical novel and the fictional novel; Lepori analyzes the extent of overlap between them and points out that it was not until the Age of Reason that “the transformation of history into an empirical science began.” Prior to that, she writes, “invention was a hallmark of ancient history....It was animated by rhetoric, not by evidence. Even well into the 18th century, not a few historians continued to understand themselves as artists, with license to invent.”

Is history at risk? she asks, pointing out that in the 1980s and 90s, factual literature’s “integrity as a discipline” was thought to be “in danger of being destroyed by literary theorists who insisted on the

constructedness, the fictionality, of all historical writing – who suggested that the past is nothing more than a story we tell about it ... If history is fiction,” she writes, “if history is not true, what’s the use?”

“The panic has since died down, but it hasn’t died out,” Lepori points out, and nor should it, as there is increasing evidence that many 21st century literary writers, by enacting postmodern literary theories in their prose, are developing by-and-large *new forms* as they experiment with blending fiction and nonfiction genres, subverting and transforming truth values along the way.

I co-founded my own literary journal, *Essays & Fictions*, in summer 2007, along with co-editors David Nelson Pollock and Joshua Land. We intended to showcase, explore, and define work that consciously blends the genres of fiction and essay, since we could see it happening all around us in the various literary and journalistic circles in which we worked. We decided not to separate genres on the Content page,

leaving *E&F* readers to guess at the truth value of the prose pieces printed in the journal. While there may be other journals that have hinted at similar ideas, *E&F* was, to the best of our knowledge, the first to be explicit about our effort. While some pieces in the journal are obviously rhetorical academic essays and others straight linear fiction, many are pieces that pose as something else: what begins as a reflective essay breaks down into pseudo-satirical farce; what seems like a piece of rock criticism is about a fictional band and is written by a fictional character; an acceptance speech for an award for a non-existent movie is entitled “Catcher in the Rye,” and so on. Further, the lack of an absolute truth statement, or a dividing line, destabilizes the truth value in *all* the pieces in the journal, not just the transgressive, imaginative ones.

Incomprehensible criticism, pseudo-theory, pseudo-philosophy, false history, fictional biographies, faction, embellished memoirs, and texts that destabilize as they are consumed are amongst *E&F*'s featured publications:

more writers are using these forms, and there were no homes for these texts in contemporary literary journals, the vast majority of which seem unfamiliar with Jacques Derrida's claim to have invalidated the assumptions of genre theory (Duff 219), as most contemporary journals continue to separate their contents into categories of fiction, essay, poetry, and criticism.

There has been little analysis of this phenomenon in contemporary literary criticism, and little effort to draw from linguistic, theoretical, pedagogical, and philosophical innovations and apply them to the literature that splices fiction and nonfiction, that which bends and subverts language and truth value, and in doing so, blows up many of our previous assumptions about the relationship between genre and factual truth with bombs; a closer look at this phenomenon may tell us valuable things about our social and artistic motives, as well as our current relationship with literature and language.

In this essay, I have three goals: first, to give a brief,

elementary introduction to the concept of **breach** literature that I've developed and to back it up with examples that go as far back as the Renaissance; second, to give a social context for breach by looking at crises of anxiety and faith in language as demonstrated by politicians and reflected in the "truth wars" between 21st century memoir writers and the public, who have felt betrayed by the writer's bid to make use of imaginative license; and third, to give theoretical context for breach through discussion of fluctuations in genre theory, using gender theory as a point of comparison.

A thorough discussion of breach requires drawing from several different disciplines, too many to cover in-depth here: philosophy, political rhetoric, sociology, linguistic theory, pedagogy, and literary theory, to begin with. In my PhD dissertation for the prestigious program at Cornell University, where I hope to have the opportunity to study with distinguished and honorable literary scholars, such as Jonathan Correll, Barbara Culler, Nicholas Saccamano, and Neil Salvato, I intend

to cross disciplinary lines to explore breach as a 21st century literary phenomenon. This particular essay, however, will falter on the side of over-generalization, as it requires a bird's-eye view to bring the entire scope of breach into primary focus, and thus necessitates referencing many texts and theories without plunging into any one of them closely.

However, my assumptions lean the heaviest on Derrida, in that I would argue that in regards to breach and thus in regards to genre, it is far less important to taxonomize a text than it is to learn how to "read" the text that presents a contradictory snarl of cultural signifiers. There is a language in the snarl that the next generation of readers must learn to decode in order to take their own reading and writing to a more elevated level. There is a harmony and a shared perspective in realism that allows for a fairly painless transaction between writer and reader, but as deconstructionists have shown, the universe is in the *GAP* between the expectations of a genre (determined by history, culture, and social mores)

and the reality of what the writer chooses to put down on the page. In the tradition of Situationist pataphysics, nonsense literature, and culture jamming, where there is tension, disparity, contradiction, disjoinment, and disunity between “concrete” value and its linguistic representation, a complex language emerges. Reader Response theory deems the transmission, consumption, and interpretation of this language at least partially, if not wholly, subjective – the experience the reader has when absorbing the text is utterly dependent on the perspective and context of the individual. Contact Zone theory, in its study of classrooms, shows that where these varying perspectives meet and mingle, a contact zone is created; each clash creates a new area to understand and explore; to understand how breach is constructed allows both readers and writers a higher command of the languages they consume and create.

21st century breach literature has absorbed all of these cultural phenomena in its coming of age. It forms “in the gap” exposed and promulgated by

Deconstructionists, and even, ambitiously, attempts to enact the gap itself. It creates innovative forms, novel modes, and complex languages. It forces us to question the uses and capacities of language, as we must: a better understanding of how language and meaning are transmitted and absorbed, and how rhetoric is abused to wage atrocities, must permeate cultures other than the academic elite. Meanwhile, in literature, while not entirely unprecedented, our cultural obsession with distinguishing between what is true and what is not true has bled into a meltdown of the division between fiction and nonfiction, and given rise to a burgeoning genre I will attempt to construct as its own tradition; perhaps I named it for Derrida, in any case I have come to refer to it as literature of *the breach*.

I.

Acknowledging a writer’s constructive choices in matters of genre is crucial in order to decipher the kind

of transgressive literature described above, with which I have become fascinated, and which will be my main focus of exploration in this essay. I will attempt to define what breach literature is, and in the process, root out, expose, explore, and shape how breach has flourished in the past several years as a literature that makes use of several genres at once and conforms fully to none; a literature that bends the expected use of language to subvert truth values and muddy the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction.

I have settled on the term **breach** after ruling out other, similar terms. I first liked the term *transgressive literature*, but there already is a transgressive literature, which was first identified and defined by Michael Silberblatt in an essay for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1993. Locating its roots in the work of writers such as the Marquis de Sade, and later tracing its influence on literary writers (George Bataille, William Burroughs, Michel Houellebecq, David Foster Wallace, Gary Indiana) as well as popular writers (Chuck Palahniuk,

Hunter S. Thompson, Bret Easton Ellis), *The Atlantic Monthly* defines transgressive fiction as:

a literary genre that graphically explores such topics as incest and other aberrant sexual practices, mutilation, the sprouting of sexual organs in various places on the human body, urban violence and violence against women, drug use, and highly dysfunctional family relationships, and that is based on the premises that knowledge is to be found at the edge of experience and that the body is the site for gaining knowledge.

While violations of the body are likely to always be a primary mode of expression in avant-garde literature, breach is far less concerned with the body and far more preoccupied with violation of the psychic mass---to put it crudely, if breach turns your stomach, hopefully it is because first your mind was blown, and your body struggled to assimilate the shock of what it encountered. Further, to “transgress” is to go beyond or over a limit or a boundary; to exceed or overstep (*American Heritage*

College Dictionary, 1436). Breach, on the other hand, breaks not just a limit or a boundary, but also a *promise*, a *pact*:

Breach: 1a: an opening, a tear, or a rupture. b. a gap or rift, as in a dike or fortification. 2. A violation or infraction, as of a law or promise. 3. A breaking up or disruption of friendly relations; an estrangement. 4. A leap of a whale from the water. 5. The breaking of waves of surf (*ibid*, 171).

I am at the very beginning of my inquiry, but here are some of the hallmarks of breach that I've defined:

Breach literature is not fiction or nonfiction, but both, or neither. The most obvious initial example is everyone's favorite spatial and temporal transgressor, Monsieur Marcel Proust. *In Search of Lost Time* is well-known as a semi-autobiographical work, in which the writer creates a persona shaped but not ruled by his perceptions and experiences, and puts that voice to rigorous work exploring the possibilities of

language and the powers of memory in their capacity to "transcend" time. The result is a dreamlike effect that manages to displace and "hypnotize" the reader, who is left without the "familiar" clues of fiction and nonfiction which normally allow her to ground herself. The result is neither fiction nor nonfiction: if it may be classified, one must acknowledge that it merges the best of each genre to accomplish its mastery over the reader: the imaginative license of fiction, the expanse and breadth of a lifelong journal-turned-memoir.

Earlier, in 1833, Scottish Victorian essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle baffled audiences with *Sartor Resartus*, which, instead of being entrapped by binaries, was able to make them work together quite well, as this book *merges* facts with fiction, and demonstrates satire alongside of intellectual integrity, imagination with historical integrity. "One of the most vital and pregnant books in our modern literature, *Sartor Resartus* is also, in structure and form, one of the most daringly original," W.H. Hudson writes in his introduction. "It defies exact

classification. It is not a philosophic treatise. It is not an autobiography. It is not a romance. Yet in a sense it is all these combined.” The “autobiography” of a fictional German philosopher Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, the book uses German Idealism as the hinge on which to turn freely between fiction and nonfiction. Nonfiction in philosophic and ideological scope, the book is explicitly aware of its own complex structure, compelling the reader to recognize the linguistic and philosophical problems of trying to locate truth in text.

Finally, Romanian-turned-French writer E.M. Cioran developed a unique imaginative style with which to linguistically digest and explore nonfiction material: *Tears and Saints*, for instance, is the exquisite result of years spent studying the lives of saints. Cioran displays a carefully cultivated style comprising short stanzas, each of which create their own economy, each meticulously chosen word holding its own unique timbre in relation to the whole. For example, this passage, like all in the book and in

Cioran’s signature style, is its own stanza, separated by glyphs:

Catherine of Siena lived only on communion bread.
Easy to do when you have heaven to back you up! Ecstasy destroys the fruit of the earth. She drank the sky in the Eucharist. For the faithful, communion, that tiny particle of heaven, is infinitely more nutritious than earthly food. Why do the heights require the suppression of appetite? Why do poets, musicians, mystics and saints use *akeisis* in various ways? Voluntary hunger is a road to heaven; hunger from poverty, a crime of the earth (Cioran, 11).

The passage cannot be classified as poetry or prose, fiction or nonfiction. The tone is as enigmatic as the saints Cioran describes: is he sarcastic? Sympathetic? There is evidence for both. Literal or poetic? *Why yes. Yes, please.*¹ Cioran makes allusions to reference ideas, but doesn’t leave the reader hanging for concrete details either: the passage is based on a *fact* that is verifiable, that of Catherine of Siena’s un-earthly diet. From there, he signals a larger concept: that of asceticism and its

relationship to mystics and the arts. The form of the paragraph takes no deviant risks: it could be used as an example of how to use a topic sentence in an introductory rhetoric class. Other passages are more daring, subsisting of only a few lines that could be labeled aphorisms. Yet Cioran manages to achieve a mystifying effect---perhaps, arguably, the only one that would work for this particular subject matter. Cioran isn't afraid to take on the most complex and unknowable topics, and yet has managed to devise a syntax and a tone that *allows* him to parse through the "unfathomable." Lastly, it is worth noting how history has classified him: in the Ithaca Public Library, *Tears and Saints* is not found in fiction or in poetry, but filed quietly amidst nonfiction books on Christianity. Meaning, in my estimation, Cioran has done it: *breached* the rules of genre, blown apart the limits of both popular and literary nonfiction to present intellectual and scholarly studies in an imaginative and literary form.

Breach literature often uses nonfiction forms

to present imaginative work. Rosalie Colie's *Genre Theory in the Renaissance* lectures demonstrate her identification of the practice of *Inclusionism* in Renaissance literature: Colie outlines *uncanonical forms* and *mixed kinds*, and in her analysis examines Rabelais' 16th century *Gargantua et Pantagruel* and Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, first published in 1621, which uses the form of a medical textbook to interrogate and present a kaleidoscope of scientific and philosophical perspectives on its chosen topic. Colie focuses in part on the "conscious effort" of the text to "gather into one book the possibilities of the intellectual world: medical, spiritual, and practical information, hearsay, folklore, fairy-tale all go in, sources quoted each time" (Colie, 79). As for the "transcendent" capacity of the text, Colie is focused on *inclusionism*, whereas I would focus on *merge*:

By means of these other genres, thematically and intellectually punctuating, counterpointing, heightening his discourse even when they seem

most digressive within it, Burton managed to raise the genre of medical treatise to something *literarily more honorable* (80) (emphasis added).

Another very popular text that uses a nonfiction form to present fictional content is Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, in which the narrator, Charles Kinbote, writes a wry, sarcastic, and deranged critique of a poem by a fictional poet, John Shade. The self-contained universe Nabokov sets up finds its roots, obviously, in traditional literary criticism, but draws attention to the absurdity of the attempt to find meaning throughout the poem by sucking all meaning and expectation from traditional literary tropes like symbols. This can be most clearly seen in Kinbote's notes on line 149, in which his characters encounter a series of natural events that would easily be recognized as symbols in a traditional reading of the text, but a closer inspection reveals no tangible connection between the characters or plot and the phenomenon: no divine wrath accompanies the

thunder, no self-realization joins the lightning, there is no test of character to be encountered in the forest, and no moment of enlightenment accompanies a steep climb up a mountain. Nabokov, or Shade himself, or Kinbote recapping Shade, clues the reader in to the folly of approaching a text in this way: "Of student papers ...there are certain trifles I do not forgive," Kinbote says Shade told him. "Having read (the book) like an idiot. Looking in it for symbols; for example: "The author uses the striking image *green leaves* because green is the symbol of happiness and frustration"" (Nabokov, 156). As the book progresses, the analysis of Shade's poem is further destabilized by Kinbote's descent into obsessive neurosis and the revelation that he is not Kinbote, after all, but a character entitled Charles Xavier, whose story Kinbote slowly reveals in fits and starts throughout the commentary and footnotes.

Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and Polish essayist Tadeusz Konwicki's fictional journal entries are further examples of **breach** texts

where nonfiction forms are used to present imaginative content, as is Jorge Luis Borges, whose *A Universal History of Iniquity* is now a collection of stories with a “bibliography,” but was originally published piecemeal, one story at a time, in an Argentine newspaper: based on its formal presentation, readers assumed each story was “true” in the journalistic sense. Last, I conclude this point by referencing two beloved philosophers: Soren Kierkegaard, who also used the journal form to expound pre-existentialist philosophies and musings that may fairly be alluded to as literary, and finally, Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein, whose *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* uses a form and linguistic structure so exquisite as to fairly be called poetry; yet, as with Kierkegaard, the “hinge” of logic orients the text, and allows readers to openly transgress and transcend boundaries of literary genre and expectation.

Breach literature scrambles material, thematic, and linguistic signifiers to create a complex language for the reader to both decode

and contribute to. In *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, Rabelais, Colie writes, “exploits the power and variety of allusion as shortcuts to categorization” (Colie, 77) in his five-part series of inter-connected novels, using languages and literary forms themselves as the unifying schemes for this work, thus “demonstrat[ing] both the limitations and the totality of a language-system” and “reveal[ing] the limitations of even very large categories”(77). While utilizing them, Rabelais takes shots at forms and genres themselves, Colie points out: the lists and catalogues he uses “are a way of honoring the *genus universum*, of getting it all in, as well as of mocking epic catalogues”(78).

E&F co-editor David Pollock does something similar in his satirical literary criticism, presented as blogged diary entries grouped under the title *The Self is a Vicious Cycle*. Pollock’s narrator bears his own name and spoofs on an overly proper, upper-class Brit who grapples with bouts of depression and incestuous desires in between expounding his half-developed post-Lacanian analysis

on literature. Pollock the narrator names familiar writers and popular texts (Tao Lin, Zadie Smith, Thomas Pynchon), but renders them unrecognizable in the actions and ideologies he attributes to them. By a reference to Lacan, we're clued into his philosophical and theoretical framework, and the allusions of the nonsense literature he fashions cast a scathing critique on the lazy ideas of the postmodern literati:

A week ago I was at a writers' banquet with some other members of the current post-Lacanian literati. There was Benjamin Kunkel fiddling with the karaoke (?) machine so he could sing the Beatles' classic rock song "I'm Looking Through You, You're not Insane" (appropriate, appropriate). In a corner somewhere, Tao Lin lectured on psychic exchange between New Orleans Katrina deceased and Lil' Wayne's current masterpiece, and how the voices of the dead trail through sexualized beats like robots on the verge of seizure ("This is what angels sound like," he said, "in our modern age.") ... The unknown who wrote the book is an ex-med student named Rivka Galchen. There is a

new ideological perspective that can be applied to her work. I call it "Lovelessness (S/a)"

Atmospheric Disturbances Synopsis: Welcome to the 27th Century. The sky has turned the color of a bruised peach. Our husbands and wives slog through their work lives, stopping in the restroom to spit in the sink or pretending to urinate, only to avoid their duties. Our protagonist, a doctor named Ladislav, has become obsessed with Pynchon's novel *Against the Day*, particularly the anarchist faction of the cast. And he has become convinced his wife is something of a mine owner, except she is a house wife, she owns nothing, plus she has only read *Slow Learner*, which Ladislav believes does not count as a Pynchon book. A supplement, he calls it. Most of the novel passes in a blur, like traffic. What sticks out are the countless scenes in which the protagonist hides small explosives all over their house, blowing up the oven, the empty bird cage ("the canary's memory was more poignant now than its chirps ever could have been"), the herb garden. Then he beats her repeatedly with his belt. Why I think this book is a masterpiece, despite its

stylistic dependency on Pynchon himself, it ends happily. As a matter of fact, the last line of the novel: “Ladislaw wrapped his arm around her, kissed her cheek and told her never to mention the name Scarsdale Vibe again. That name was a force, true, but they would never see that face, and this was their saving grace.” ...

... Until next time, my dears. Remember: You are not what you think you are; your neighbor is (Pollock).

Acknowledging the presence of the Unknowable by referencing the Lacanian Other, creating a pseudo, fictional summary of an actual text that was drawing very positive reviews at the time the blog was posted, incomprehensibly pairing George Eliot’s Ladislaw (who is not a doctor; that was Lydgate) with Pynchon, and crafting imitation ideology in philosophic form and discourse gives the reader quite a bit to process – and, in reader-response fashion, to contribute to. There are plenty of gaps in this passage between *expectation* and *reality* – how

will the reader respond to such a destabilization of the use of language? Pollock, like Rabelais, is mocking language systems, *getting it all in*, from Lil’ Wayne to Rivka Galchin, and doing so in a way that allows for, perhaps demands, full participation from a reader, however baffled, outraged, or delighted he or she might be at the outset.

Breach literature often uses self-produced forms to add material layers to its language; that is to say breach literature is both substance AND style, form AND function. Perhaps no one was more scathing about the New York literati than *Believer* co-founding editor Ed Park, with whom I had the pleasure to work at *The Village Voice* when I was his intern in the book department and literary supplement. Park’s first novel, *Personal Days*, released last year, uses the dismal setting of the office for its scornful portrait of corporate life, but here I’m more concerned with Park’s covert self-produced act of literary rebellion entitled *The New-York Ghost*. E&F considered the *Ghost* to be

a prime example of breach literature and we were lucky enough to secure Park's permission to publish the first "ultra-rare" edition in our second issue.

After *The Village Voice* was bought by New Times, and the editors were let go, Park designed the *Ghost* and sent the first copy out to 20 of his friends. He continued to do so, anonymously, for more than a year, before finally revealing his identity to the *New York Times* in November 2007 (Knafo). *E&F* felt simpatico with the *Ghost's* opening assertions:

The problem was, there was so much to read; and at the same time, it seemed, there was nothing worth reading at all. Deluged with daily papers, alternative newsweeklies, listings collations, and blogs (short for *worldwide-web-logarithms*) galore, people gradually grew grim about the mouth

before weeping openly in the streets. ¶ Variety was an illusion! Only the typeface and the paper quality differed. It was all celebrity profiles, followed by the tearing down of the celebrity, followed by five paragraphs about what was the best shampoo. ¶ Someone thought it would be a good idea to start something new. ¶ We are going to do it all by ourselves now. ¶ (77).

Park's irony and wit make the *Ghost* a mirthful read, but its true breach components have as much to do with form as with tone: its design claims equal parts of its concept, as it imitates a newspaper, like the New York gazettes of old; at least one person I sent the *Ghost* to didn't quite get the joke, and took it at face value as a newsletter. Park comments on the vapid anti-intellectualism of certain corners of the New York

commercial publishing world with features like the “One word review: **Hilarious.**” Finally, Park’s act of self-production was an innovation in itself: by emailing the *Ghost* as a pdf, he dealt with the *pesky* “distribution problem” to his own advantage, urging readers to leave print-outs of the piece around their office.

Breach literature confuses a reader. If it is working well, it *stuns* the reader. Something like the Shock and Awe technique, this is a potentially rich moment; maybe change can happen here, or even *revolution*. Breach literature pretends to be one thing, or many things, but is really something else, or several other things, and also, it is nothing else, or no-thing. Breach understands that words, like genres, shapeshift and change meaning when left to their own devices. Unlike the fabled pot, a “watched” piece of breach will politely, but definitely, transform before your eyes.

Breach literature understands that to compose a text is to create reality. The Scope Is Too Large! A feeling of suffocation comes over the

chest. The breath collapses, the solar plexus heaves. This will be the last pose; now please, in your mind, thank everyone else for being here. This suggestion has lost its focus and diffused into something else, something I can’t understand. I have lost the thread. The scale of implication is overwhelming, too large to contemplate – do you understand what I propose? To open up an entirely new area of study? We are skittering about on “frictionless ice,”² dancing and embracing on the frozen surface, while beneath us are vast, churning depths. But be careful. Depths suck you under; most don’t emerge. The surge leads to a vortex that will whip you into chopped-up little pieces. Is this leading to dismemberment? Can you be more specific? Can you add an example? I’m reaching beyond what is familiar, and in the meantime the argument dissolves,, slipping through my fingers like loose, dry sand grains.

Breach literature manipulates, sometimes sadistically, and breach can hurt, but really, it is for the reader’s own good, in the end. **We** always knew

that to confuse is to stimulate, but now there is proof: Benedict Carey writes in this month's *New York Times* on a scintillating study: two sets of college students were given stories to read and then immediately subjected to an implicit learning classification test. One set of 20 college students read an incoherent Kafka piece, "The Country Doctor," while the other set (also 20 students) read a coherent story – one that, we can assume, was a nice little piece of realism with a traditional narrative arc and an obvious theme rooted in a familiar moral or trope. *Guess who scored higher on the test?* The Kafka readers found *30 percent* more classification categories and were *twice* as accurate in their answers (Carey). "The fact that the group who read the absurd story identified more letter strings suggests that they were more motivated to look for patterns than the others," Dr. Heine, a principal researcher, says in the article. "And the fact that they were more accurate means, we think, that they're forming new patterns they wouldn't be able to form otherwise" (Carey).

Finally, **Breach literature uses *merge to transcend***. Like Hegel. It really works! Our best example would credit literary pioneers Deborah Tall and John D'Agata for championing the lyric essay, which blends reflective essay and poetry, in their literary journal, *The Seneca Review*. On their Web site they write, "The poem holds its ground on its own margin ... The poem is lonely. It is lonely and en route. Its author stays with it. If the reader is willing to walk those margins, there are new worlds to be found." It is fitting to close this profile description with D'Agata, as the lyric essay itself could be an example of breach: a 2003 essay written by Ben Marcus, published in *The Believer*, explores many of the same ideas I've mentioned here. Marcus notes "a new category of writing" without naming it and reviews D'Agata's daring essay anthology *The Next American Essay*, which contains many examples of imaginative nonfiction, many in highly stylized forms: cooking instructions in a recipe by Harry Matthews, a piece that is all footnotes by Jenny Bouilly, a historical narrative

told as a Monopoly game in progress. “Fiction writers, take note,” Marcus writes. “Some of the best fiction these days is being written as nonfiction.” I would take this a step further, however, to claim that the fusion, or merge of the genres is actually a genre creation of its own right, not to be enfolded and enveloped into the genre category of fiction, nor labeled any deviant of nonfiction: that a conscious acknowledgement of this on the part of both reader and writer opens up space for writers to experiment with varying degrees of truth value and linguistic integrity in their literary work.

In American prose, contemporary realism is shallow and sleepy. The literary innovations and epiphanies of modernism seem all but forgotten as much current memoir, fiction, and personal essay suffers from an appalling dearth of sophisticated craft (*the last gasps of a dying culture?*). Endowed with a post-structuralist understanding of the slippery nature of language and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of truth-telling, and armed with the expectation of a reader’s construction

of meaning via reader-response theory, some of today’s most innovative and creative writers have begun consciously scrambling their forms and misplacing signifiers in their prose in order, perhaps, to create a dialogue between expectation and reality, to create complicated work that requires decoding and an increased effort on the part of the reader.

To build on the words of D’Agata and Tall, for those “willing to walk those margins, there are new worlds waiting,” not only “to be found,” but also defined.

II.

When former President of the United States Bill Clinton uttered his now-famous defense, “It depends on what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is,” a post-structuralist awareness of language’s capacity to shapeshift in chameleon fashion became abundantly obvious to mainstream America, and many an armchair pundit was baffled and stumped. From a semantic perspective,

Clinton was entirely correct: “is not,” expressed in the present tense, does not, in fact, have the same concrete meaning as “never has been.” When the 1998 grand jury testimony was released to the public, infotainment consumers watched in confusion as Clinton and Ken Starr’s questioners wrangled over the literal/concrete and the abstract/figurative meanings of key phrases: sexual relations, contact, touching, is; many spectators, all the while certain that sexual relations as they understood them had occurred, were astounded to witness the lengths of linguistic haggling that obfuscated the issue.

Clinton’s attempts to clear himself through semantic literalism may have amused, or infuriated, lawyers and postmodern linguists, and it didn’t, in the end, prevent his impeachment. In retrospect, however, this episode appears as a harbinger of what was to come, and possibly even created the conditions that allowed for a permissible disconnect that enlarged to grotesque proportions during the last eight years of Conservative

rule and throughout the McCain campaign, as the crack between concrete value and the linguistic expression intended to communicate a shared meaning slowly enlarged into a yawning, hellish abyss of spectacle and farce.

The Conservative thrust to remove all fixed or communal meaning from language can be humorously seen in an episode of the second season of “30 Rock”; Alec Baldwin, having been demoted at NBC, takes a job with the Bush administration, and as water pours through the ceiling of his office, he complains to a brainwashed Matthew Broderick about the leak that will have to be fixed. “There’s no leak,” Broderick says, staring him straight in the face and holding out a piece of paper. “We did a study.” He points to the words on the paper. “See, no leak.”

Operating in the wake of 9/11, Bush capitalized on confusion and fear when relying on the power of allusion in language, pairing unrelated words together in a vague but inflammatory way, giving rise to more,

ever-increasing confusion, leading to even more fear. Whether Bush represented a Freudian father or the Lacanian Other, a majority of Americans, as well as the mainstream press, rejected the notion that his egregious discourse might be a sign of clearly unmerited authority and signaled the green light for the invasion of Iraq with editorials, letters, and verbal rhetoric. Bush's strategy for building a case for preemptive invasion seemed to be to simply pair a few words together multiple times: terror (leads to) Al Qaeda attack (leads to) terror (caused by) Arabs (who live in) Iraq (with) Arabs (and) Muslims (who) hate our way of life (let's go!). A few phony documents presented to the United Nations sealed the deal, and while many activists and intellectuals vehemently protested, they were drowned out by many more who, tragically, needed to watch for themselves the entire "Operation Iraqi Freedom" devolve into mandates of public torture, dismemberment, the abuse of American troops, and the drain on our economy that has contributed to the current global financial crisis.

Perhaps no one is more self-conscious and explicit about their breach work as writer Stephen Greene, Cornell '65 alumnus (perhaps I, too, will one day be a Cornell *alumna*), in reference to his self-produced novel and fictionalized biography/memoir *The Boathouse*, released earlier this year: the book "traces the border where fiction and nonfiction meet," Green writes, "which is where the Iraq War, itself, seems to exist."³

It is no surprise, then, that the question of "what is true" has bubbled to the top of American cultural consciousness and made its way into our literature. At the same time that Americans have been faced with incomprehensible language games that have been used as justification for atrocities, and as they remained under the dominion of a government that ignored the needs and views of its constituents, American literary readers became obsessed with *truth value* in books that claim to be nonfiction, and delighted in texts that played with the genre definitions themselves, quietly existing in the gray area between fiction and fact. A look back at the

literary scandals of truth that rose steadily throughout the first years of the 21st century would include first and foremost, perhaps, that of James Frey, who was publicly shamed by *The Smoking Gun* and *Oprah* for fabricating large parts of his best-selling memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*. And earlier this year, another best-seller, *Bringing Down the House*, was exposed by Drake Bennett in *The Boston Globe* as having been “embellished beyond recognition” (Schuessler). At *The New York Times*, Jayson Blair was outed for fabricating information for his stories, and similar incidents were reported by the *USA Today*. It has become a matter of public concern and debate that editors and publishing houses often do not fact-check and rely on writers to gather “good” information.

More alarming than the exposures themselves is the fact that the arena in which the accused stands bears more than a little of the carnivalesque. E&F co-editor Joshua Land has pointed out that there is a three-step cultural lashing for people like Frey which over-

saturates airtime until fatigue sets in and the matter is dropped, thus ensuring that the underlying problems and questions of the issue at hand are never addressed. In this case, one might have asked, why is only what can be proven with empirical data the hard rule for a memoir? Instead, the three steps are these: Calling Out the Career-Threatening Gaffe, The Public Apology, and The Ritual of Public Humiliation (Land). The questions posed by these dilemmas of fact and creative license did not pose philosophical, theoretical, or linguistic concerns in the slightest: the entire cultural dialogue subsumed with these issues, or at least the heavily-accessed public writings about them, revolved around Fact itself, and the question of what exactly constitutes a fact.

Why is this important? It needs more attention and exploration for a thorough perspective, but it does seem strange that the same people who would passively allow their leaders to misappropriate language to deceive them in such a grotesque fashion would become so

frantically outraged about fictionalized content in their entertainment – which is what memoirs are. Samuel G. Freedman, who teaches nonfiction writing at Columbia’s Graduate School of Journalism and who authored a memoir about his mother, wrote a scathing 2006 commentary against book publishing editors in which he argues that fiction and nonfiction have “fundamentally different compacts” with the reader: “in return for the freedom to invent,” he writes, “fiction must reach a benchmark of psychological truth. In return for the allegiance to factuality, nonfiction can present what may seem implausible and tell a reader, But that’s what really happened.”

Freedman is on the side of the outraged readers, arguing that they were conned, lied to, and betrayed, and that the industry’s “indifference to factuality” was to blame. The “collapse of the barrier between fiction and nonfiction does matter,” he writes, because of *specificity*, because “Jane and Susan are not interchangeable labels; they are the names of real people, different people with

different histories, personalities, and motivations.” To fail to define these differences, he writes, is “to tell a willfully incomplete story and also to be spectacularly lazy.”

What is a complete story? When do we know when we’ve included enough details to reach the pinnacle of “completion”? Freedman doesn’t question *what is truth*, how is it communicated, how do we, as a culture and as individuals, determine what is fact and what is fantasy, how do we choose which details to include in our “true” accounts, how does language convey truth, what are the limitations of language for this task, and finally, why, or if, simply being told “That’s what really happened,” of having detail after detail heaped on the reader, is ultimately *valuable* for any reason. Freedman assumes it is; I’m not always so sure, or at least, I would like to see a more thorough argument to convince me.

“We tell ourselves stories in order to live,” Joan Didion writes. Throughout *The White Album* and *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*, she repeatedly asks herself, and the

reader by default, who is quietly listening: why these details? Why in this order? What story am I telling, and why? Perhaps, what is actually “spectacularly lazy” in literary pursuits is to ignore the subjective ambiguity of language and literature, an understanding of which could be used to the considerable benefit of intellectual and creative journey for both writer and reader, to decline to recognize imaginative powers for what they are and how they work, and instead to spend one’s writing time filling up page after page with empirical data, however *specific* it may be.

I would not advocate for putting historians or factual data collectors out of business; there are obvious legitimate social functions for this kind of work. Lepori’s article lists the counter-arguments: “Donald Kagan, in his 2005 Jefferson lecture, grumbled about the perils of ‘pseudo-philosophical mumbo-jumbo’ ... In 1990, Sir Geoffrey Elton called postmodern literary theory “the intellectual equivalent of crack.” The point that is being missed in both these criticisms is that a new *literary*

form or even genre is on the rise, and it’s working *off of* nonfiction forms: we don’t need to eliminate “pure” history or “pure” fiction, as much as we need to bring a literary self-consciousness to the text as we consume it, taking truth value into account as much as we would, for example, plot, structure, theme, tone, symbols, and word choices.

III.

In the last two decades of the 20th century, gender theorists, genre theorists, deconstructionists, and post-feminist literary critics completed the task of picking clean the carcass of second wave feminist literary criticism and blowing apart any fixed notion of the merit of generic textual classification. The primary charge that resounds in these analyses is *essentialism*, the presumption of a universal, inherent, “natural” femininity that each human with a vagina is born with, grows into, and dies by. Likewise, an essentialist genre

theory might lean too heavily on classical concepts of genre, or perceive in every work marks of what Goethe called *Naturformen*, an allusion to Aristotle's so-called "natural forms" of poetry (epic, lyric and drama): until the onset of Romanticism, it was impossible to conceive of genres as anything other than fixed, stationary, comprehensive, and para-historical (Duff, 2-3).

As black feminists, gender theorists, and queer theorists would point out, second-wave feminists blundered in their assumptions that Caucasian, middle-to-privileged class Judeo-Christian heteronormal femininity was the predominant genus of the species. With Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, and gender performance exposed as social discourse in the language of Michel Foucault, the gynocriticism of Elaine Showalter ran into serious trouble, and second-wave feminism died its first kind of death. A more recent death knell for the female tradition in literature seemed to sound last year when Toril Moi presented a lecture at the Tate Modern entitled "I Am Not A Woman Writer";

so the cycle has completed itself, in its way: an explosion of pride in femininity led to the search for the absolute nature of Female, which gave way to the realization that femininity is a social and linguistic construct, and finally led to the invalidation of the female tradition in literature as a theoretical perspective for literary criticism, resulting in yet another way to deny women a unique literary identity, the "precious specialty" George Eliot saw in female Victorian literature (even taking into account all the *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* that Eliot herself harshly criticized.)

The cultural gyrations of feminism and gynocriticism are not the primary subject of inquiry here, rather they are in the periphery as a *touchstone*, an example of the trouble we get into when we are frustrated rather than liberated by certain realities – namely, that of the paradox that chaos, complexity, and multiplicity co-exist with binary in literature as in life -- or at least, we persistently experience the persuasive illusion of a binary and may use it as a preliminary form of categorization,

a sometimes annoying but often pragmatic analytical function if supplemented with other, more complex, nuanced, and specific perspectives and analyses.

Genre theory has followed similar cyclic rotations of interpretation throughout literary history, and bounced back and forth between the twin poles of absolutism (of genre categories) and negation of genre's existence, and in the process, has tentatively landed in various middle grounds both fertile and fallow. And as for Aristotle, it turns out that what Gerard Genette calls the "seductive triad" is actually a false attribution: in his anthology *Modern Genre Theory*, David Duff points out that in 1979, Genette conclusively demonstrated that the triad of epic, lyric, and tragic is actually a work of revisionist history by romantics and postromantics, the *merging of two different genre theories* of Plato and Aristotle: Plato saw three modes (narrative, dramatic, and mixed), while Aristotle only defined two, epic and tragic (Duff, 4). The original divisions were based on modes of *enunciation* in their delivery, Genette argues (Genette,

212). Further, both Plato and Aristotle made sharp distinctions between mode and genre that later got lost: "each genre was defined essentially by a specification of content that was in no way prescribed by the definition of its mode," he writes (212).

"Neither system, it should be noted, assigns a proper place to the lyric," Duff points out, "which is only incorporated into the supposedly Aristotelian triad by much later acts of substitution and amendment" (Duff, 4). Genette's 1979 essay "The Architext" points fingers at Karl Vietor and Hegel, but first, at Goethe himself, who was infatuated with the lyric "as a burst of rapture" (Genette, 212). "The romantic and postromantic division ... views the lyrical, the epical, and the dramatic no longer as simply modes of enunciation but as real genres, whose definitions already inevitably include thematic elements, however vague," Genette writes: "... romantics and postromantics were not overly concerned about dragging Plato and Aristotle into all these matters" (211). Their motives, he argues were

“a deepseated respect for orthodoxy” at the tail end of classicism, and, in the 20th century, a widespread “retrospective illusion” (211).

In his overview of Western genre theory, Robert J. Connors moves on from the pre-Renaissance genre classifications of Aristotle, Plato, Horace, and Dante to the work of French Renaissance critics Julius Caesar Scaliger and Nicolas Boileau, who, he writes, set up the “commanding and rigid form that we now usually associate with neoclassicism” (Connors 30). Boileau’s proposed “immutable” genre categories, presented in 1674 in the form of a long verse-poem entitled *Arte poetique*, were assumed to be fixed, rigid, and absolute until Samuel Johnson challenged them in his *Rambler* papers in 1751 (33-34). Johnson sounds like a very early sociologist when he argues that genre categories are solidified by custom rather than essential nature, are fostered rather than inherent, and he sounds a call of freedom for all who would want to write outside of prescribed genre guidelines: the “just endeavor of

a writer,” Johnson says, is to differentiate between “that which is established because it is right, from that which is right only because it is established; that he may neither violate essential principles by a desire of novelty, nor debar himself from the attainment of beauties within his view, by a needless fear of breaking rules *which no literary dictator had authority to enact*” (34) (emphasis added).

Here is the pre-imagination of the rebel, revolution and *liberté*, the glorious elevation of the individual imagination in the social upheavals and Romantic movement that would follow. Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats relied heavily on genre to shape their works, but were more interested in the text that emerged than the genre that shaped it: “It is by no means essential that a poet should accommodate his language to this traditional form,” Shelley writes in his *Defense of Poetry*, “... every poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors” (36). Duff points out that Romantics carried this idea further: “The most

pervasive legacy of Romanticism,” he writes, “was the idea that it was possible to ignore altogether the doctrine of genre”; in 1797, Friedrich Schlegel made the audacious proclamation that “every poem is a genre unto itself” (Duff 4-5).

Duff points out that these ideas would later make their way into Modernist manifestos and literature, but not until the post-Victorian era, more than one hundred years later. Romantics had also argued against the privilege and elitism that shaped traditional poetic forms, Connors points out, and battled against “any attempt to exclude works from consideration because they did not meet the rigid expectations of class” (36). If you combine this precursor to postcolonial theory, this growing social awareness of who is actually making the rules, or, more specifically, who creates Reality, with a then-contemporary philosophy that was about to exert formidable influence across several intellectual disciplines in the form of Georg W. F. Hegel’s dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, it is from there a

short and logical leap to Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and the evolutionary paradigm that swept literary criticism in the late 19th century, culminating with Ferdinand Brunetiere’s magnum opus *L’évolution des genres* in 1890 (4). And, then, it is back to obsessive classification and essential, inherent autonomy for the genre – albeit one that morphs and changes when met with new conditions.

Only a decade or so later, the pendulum would swing back the other way with Benedetto Croce’s *Aesthetic* in 1900, in which Croce argued that genre was “nothing more than ‘superstition,’” Duff writes, “of ancient classical origin,” which served no function other than to “deceive us as to the true nature of the aesthetic”(5). Duff argues for a chain of influence from Croce to French writer and theorist Maurice Blanchot, who took a similar stance against genre, to Derrida and his heavily influential two-part essay *The Law of Genre*, published in 1979, in which Derrida claimed to have “invalidated the assumptions that even the most advanced genre

theory rests on,” Duff argues (219).

Because the signs for a given genre are not contained within the genre itself, because the identification of genre is dependent on the analysis of the text, an outsider or “double” perspective, Derrida argues, genre theory’s quest for taxonomy is deeply problematic. Viewed from this perspective, *any* attempt to make a statement of what genres are, how they function, and even whether or not they exist runs into speculation.

The Law of Genre opens with statements at contradiction with what I’ve advocated for here:

“Genres are not to be mixed.

I will not mix genres.

I repeat:” (and he does) “the previous two statements” (221).

Which, he argues, can conjure up multiple reactions: one, *I will not* as in *it will not happen*, *we will not* as in *it will not happen*, or two, a “sharp order” or “authoritarian summons”; (Derrida 221), as in “I must not,” or, the sense of the *forbidden*; (where a line is

drawn in the sand, it does not behoove the individual or the society to cross it).

There is “no genreless text,” Derrida hypothesizes, as “making genre its mark, a text demarcates itself.” However: “the re-mark of belonging does not belong,” in that one must search for genre classifications *outside of the text*: “the eyelid closes, but barely, an instant among instants, and what it closes is verily the eye, the view, the light of day.”

The eyes must be closed for insight to appear:

“... *without such respite, nothing would come to light*” (emphasis added) (230).

While Derrida maintains that Genette places genre theory as an opposition between nature and history, he is explicitly more concerned with “the relationship of nature to history, of nature to its others, *precisely when genre is on the line*” (emphasis in original), and I’d agree that rather than to seek to categorize literary texts into faux genus and species, it is far more pragmatic and meaningful to analyze the roots, contexts, and

conditions of nomenclature itself, and in this particular case, dependent on further research, I hypothesize that a combination of political and theoretical circumstances have combined to form 21st century breach literature, that an understanding of language games and relative subjectivity in linguistic construction, interpretation, and communication collided with socio-political misuse of language, giving rise to literary forms that use truth values, which were once assumed to be fixed, as variables to be manipulated, thus giving rise to new forms, new codes, and new meanings.

With awareness of boundaries found *outside* the subject, in the privacy of darkness, Derrida concludes that to speak of genre is to signal its death knell:

Without it, neither genre nor literature come to light, but as soon as there is this blinking of an eye, this clause of this floodgate of genre, at the very moment that a genre or literature is broached, at that very moment, degenerescence has begun, the end begins (225).

In his 2003 *Believer* article, Marcus has a similar wish: “It might just be that the genre bending fiction writers ... so far lack a champion like John D’Agata,” he writes; although, in D’Agata’s “protective, liberating fold,” these “categories can cease to matter. “Once upon a time,” Marcus concludes, “there will be writers who won’t care what imaginative writing is called and will read it for its passion, its force of intellect, and for its formal originality.”

So, as in the case of the Female, we are left once again back at the starting point, now Enlightened, but once again Mute. However, all is not for naught: for breach welcomes the diffusion of its boundaries rather than guards against it. Derrida’s death is found when you go searching for genre boundaries and rules and discover they are not *universally* applicable to any text or text(s). Wittgenstein was right to call our linguistic interactions “language games”: before the Play can begin, much less end, an utterance must thrust itself at an object or set of ideas. I don’t quite agree with Marcus that there will

be a golden moment or era in time in which we will never worry about what to “name” imaginative texts; classification, while ultimately illusory, is nonetheless a useful tool if not mistaken for Absolute Reality, and while I have stated that breach is nothing and no-thing, I have attempted to show that breach literature needs a Name, because right now, above all else, breach is ripe, gunning to come out and Play.

A 1989 essay by Mary Eagleton entitled “Genre and Gender” gives an overview of the cross-pollination of gender theory and genre theory, and is quite adept at exploring the problems feminist theory encountered when trying to identify subversive forms and fictional styles that were universally or inherently *female*. Because the words “gender” and “genre” are etymologically equivalent in French, Duff writes (250), it is not surprising that we are drawn to exploring their intersections, if for nothing more than novelty. After conclusively demonstrating that there are no absolute elements of female fiction writing in any

genre, Eagleton concludes with a series of outstanding questions that might just as delicately be posed toward our genre paradoxes: “What is the relationship of gender to writing? Should we talk of the female author or of feminine writing? Does the relationship differ with different literary forms and is there, therefore, a particular scope in relating gender to the short story? Can we create a criticism which is non-essentialist, non-reductive but subtly alive to the links between gender and genre?” (Eagleton 260).

Because the two theories have run into similar conjectural stalemates that resemble Buddhist koans (*we know genre and gender don't exist; we know genre and gender determine our existence, provide vessels for our intangibles, give forms to our throbbing black holes and passionate protrusions ...*), we might veer over into pedagogy, borrow from Jean Piaget's theory of Constructivism, and bear in mind that in all knowledge and education, we *build* our literary theories, genres, and kinds rather than *root them out*; that we construct them

according to historical conditions and psychological need; that while an essentialist theory is concerned with what women and/or literary genres *are*, we now know that the far more interesting and important question is what women and/or works of literature *can be* when, in possession of consciousness regarding social and linguistic construction, writers and readers are given full freedom to *choose* (to *construct*) genre and gender preferences and representations in the work they create and consume.

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End Notes

¹ Quoted from Pelin Ariner's poem "My Stomach."

² Wittgenstein.

³ Quoted from a press release sent directly to me when I was a news editor.