The Interplay of Form and Content in Creative Nonfiction

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NOTES

While it is true that few writers can articulate their central question until days or even months into a project, they know that the question must eventually be grasped. That question may be naive, eccentric, or disturbing. The writer may worry that he or she has no right to ask it, no degree or expertise. But the very journey by which the writer acquires that expertise may be included in the book.

Most books about creative nonfiction divide the genre according to content—"memoir," "nature writing," "travel writing," "science writing." But this emphasis provides little help to beginners searching for inspiration or more experienced practitioners hoping to discover new possibilities for their craft. If a teacher shows a student an example of nature writing, what is there to say but "find something interesting to write about nature and then, well, write something like this"? A novice might imitate the author's style. But that doesn't solve the question of "Where do I begin?" or "Where do I go from there?" or "How can I hope to generate even an apprentice version of those gorgeous meditations I love to read in the work of Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, or Gretel Ehrlich?"

Dividing the genre by form might seem a dry approach. But discussing an essay's form—by which I mean its structure—is by far the most useful way to teach creative nonfiction. Think of the child who must learn to write an essay without the least idea of what an essay is. As artificial as the five-paragraph structure might be, it gives the child a goal (proving the thesis statement) and a path to follow to achieve that goal. Luckily, the essential elements of creative nonfiction are far more exciting than the elements of the five-paragraph essay. Instead of a thesis statement, most essays and nonfiction books are focused around a question. And instead of being limited to the five-paragraph form, writers of creative nonfiction (even very young ones) can choose from a dazzling array of structures that lend the essay (or the book) a pleasing forward motion and a sense of intentionality. The essay's central question keeps the writer focused on what he or she is supposed to be doing with the material; the structure provides a place for the writer to start, and a very clear sense of where to go from there.1

Ever since Montaigne invented the essay, with its roots in the verb "to try," the challenge to its practitioners is to discover what they want to say while they are trying to say it. A willingness to write about what one doesn't understand rather than what one does is the difference between the raconteur's breezy and oft-recited anecdote and the essay in which a memoirist revisits an important incident armed with a question that genuinely troubles him or her about that incident. While it is true that few writers can articulate their central question until days or even months into a project, they know that the question must eventually be grasped. That question may be naïve, eccentric, or disturbing. The writer may worry that he or she has no right to ask it, no degree or expertise. But the very journey by which the writer acquires that expertise may be included in the book. Academic scholars hide the obstacles to a search; the discovery will appear at the start of the paper, with what follows as the proof, a set of logical propositions that convinces the reader to accept the premise as true. All the false starts, the spilled beakers, and futile trips to the archives are omitted. In creative nonfiction, the journey itself, with all its suspense and frustration, provides the backbone of the piece.

With their imposing Roman numerals and alphabetical sub-points, logical outlines may help a writer organize a wealth of information. But logical outlines rarely correspond to anything we experience in the world outside our heads. Nothing about such outlines draws the writer through his or her material in a natural way, and nothing pulls the reader through the finished product except the need to read and grade it. The same is true for most other noncreative forms of prose. Think of all the generations of reporters who learned to structure their articles in that famous inverted pyramid, or the legions of science students who were taught the proper protocol for writing up their experiments, or the cadres of PhDs tutored in the only acceptable form for a dissertation, or the law students schooled in the appropriate and correct structure of a brief. These handed-down forms help the writer organize what he or she knows, but nothing in the form provides a mechanism by which the writer can develop deeper or more original ideas about the subject.

By contrast, the interplay between the central question that guides a writer's research and the form that helps that writer organize his or her findings is at the living, breathing heart of creative nonfiction. In George Orwell's famous essay "Shooting an Elephant,"[2] the synergy between content and form is preserved in the finished product. Of course, the story Orwell tells is inherently suspenseful. And his use of fictional devices —scenes arranged in chronological order with dialogue, description, and vivid, precise detail—makes the experience seem immediate. (Who can shake that image of the Dravidian coolie who has been dragged through the mud by the elephant's foot? "This was the rainy season," Orwell tells us, "and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple of yards long.... The friction of the great beast's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit.")

But the essay matters as it does because Orwell feels compelled to figure out why he shot an elephant that didn't need to be shot. He doesn't tell the story as a predigested anecdote, a bloody good yarn to entertain the officers at the club. Rather, he re-examines an experience that he didn't fully understand when it happened, an experience that *still* disturbs him. The news that a rampaging elephant has killed a poor coolie propels the younger Orwell out the door. And yet, when he finds the elephant, he knows with "perfect certainty" that he ought not to shoot him.

> It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant—it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery—and obviously one ought not to do it if it can possibly be avoided.... I thought then and I think now that his attack of "must" was already passing off; in which case he would merely wander harmlessly about until the mahout came back and caught him... I decided that I would watch him for a while to make sure that he did not turn savage again, and then go home.

There Orwell stands, surrounded by a mob willing him to shoot the elephant for the spectacle of the thing, and there, at that moment, he grasps "the futility of the white man's dominion in the East."

> Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in the front of the unarmed native crowd—seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys.... For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the "natives," and so in every crisis he has got to do what the "natives" expect of him.... I had got to shoot the elephant.... To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing—no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.

As Orwell answers the question of why he shot the elephant, he also partially answers the more universal question in which his own conundrum nests: Why do imperialists act in ways that are not in their own best interests or the best interests of the people they hope to rule? "Shooting an Elephant" is a marvelous example of the manner in which a compelling narrative and a deeply felt question about that narrative work together to produce an essay imbued not only with the suspense of "what will happen next" but the deeper suspense of what the experience will end up meaning. The thesis isn't presented at the start, with the rest of the essay serving to prove it true. Rather, the reader can watch the narrator struggling to reach his conclusion at every point along the way.

This is the way most personal narratives work. The writer replays the events of a story while comparing those events at every point to the question that troubles him. If the writer thinks his task is to describe an unusually

dramatic or comic incident, he will be tempted to put in every detail, provoking the reader to ask—even for a story about a near-death experience or a horrifying instance of abuse—why are you telling me all this? On the other hand, if a writer sits down to ponder an abstract question (why do imperialists act in ways that run counter to their own best interests?), the meditation will likely get stalled after the first five minutes (nothing makes a mind wander more quickly to what's for lunch than an abstract thematic question).

Nor does a writer need to have served the Raj to come up with an experience worth describing and a question worth answering. All E.B. White wanted to know when his nameless pig took ill was why that pig's illness should bother him so badly, given that he was raising the pig to kill it.3 Like Orwell, White holds this question in his mind as he reviews the events of the several days in which he tended that ailing pig. From scene to scene, White's central question not only gives rise to meditations on mortality, both porcine and human, it bestows a deeper significance on the humblest object that figures in the telling. When White gives the pig an enema, he muses that the pig's lot and his own "were inextricably bound now, as though the rubber tube were the silver cord." If not for the central question, that rubber tube would have remained a tube.

As the writer holds up his question to the narrative while moving along in time, the friction between the question and the scene (or even a single detail) throws up meditative sparks. The narrative provides a sort of chronological road for the essay to follow. At any point where the reader needs back story or information, the writer weaves it in, then moves on to the next event. No matter how interesting a fact, unless it elucidates some aspect of the narrative or helps to answer the central question, you have to leave it out. Finally, you revise and revise to give the reader the sense that you were intending to explore that one question from the start.

As vital as structure is to any discussion of the craft of nonfiction, it rarely gets discussed, and, if it does, the emphasis falls on the personal narrative as the primary—if not the only—form the genre can take. The very definition of creative nonfiction has almost come to be *a story that really happened*. This isn't surprising, given that a narrative is the most comfortable way for human beings to organize their experience. *First this happened, then that, then that*. But the forms of creative nonfiction are as wonderful and various as fishes in the sea. And finding the perfect form for the material a writer is trying to shape is the most important factor in whether or not that material will ever advance from a one- or two-page beginning to a coherent first draft to a polished essay.4

So, what are the forms available to nonfiction writers? As mentioned above, a first-person narrative is by far the most common. If the narrator's experience was complete before he or she started the project, the personal narrative is a memoir. (A memoir's central question might relate to public policy, as is true of Richard Rodriguez's account of growing up bilingual in *Hunger of Memory*,5 but it still is a memoir.) But writers need not be confined by the boundaries of what they already have experienced. One of the joys of nonfiction is leaving your house and discovering something that you could never have invented. The journey might lead to the North Pole by dog sled, but even a modest, shy person on a limited budget can carry out an essay-worthy trip.

In "Walden,"6 E.B. White takes us on a pilgrimage to Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond. (Although an account of a journey is in some sense a narrative, it has such a distinctive shape it deserves a label all its own.) In the guise of a letter addressed to Thoreau, White admits that he is driving to Concord "with the deliberate intention of visiting your woods...." Yet a destination is not enough. Without a question prodding the pilgrim, he might feel compelled to take notes about every single thing that happens along the way, then dump all those observations in his essay. The question White harbors is whether Thoreau's account of the year he spent living simply at Walden might still be relevant in White's own time (the essay was published in 1939). "As our common complexities increase, any tale of individual simplicity (and yours is the best written and the cockiest) acquires a new fascination; as our goods accumulate, but not our well-being, your report of an existence without material adornment takes on a certain awkward credibility."

Right at the outset, this question strikes a spark. White glimpses beside the road a woman cutting the grass with a "motorized lawn mower." But she is having such a hard time handling the machine that it appears "the lawn was mowing the lady." All along the way, other such sparks are struck, for instance when the author reads a sign warning of the "cotton surface" of the road ahead without having the faintest idea as to what a cotton surface might be, or when he catches himself undertaking the elaborate ritual of locking all four doors of his car to protect a laprobe he never uses.

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For much of his journey, White finds support for his hypothesis that Thoreau's isolation at Walden might serve as a model for how we live now. But when he reaches the pond and finds the beach crowded with townies cooling off on a scorching summer's day, the model seems less relevant. Rather than disparage the bathers for ruining this pristine site, White can't help but meditate on the swimmers' camaraderie and the more democratic use to which they put the beach:

> ... bodies plunged vigorously into the water and emerged wet and beautiful in the bright air. As I left, a boatload of town boys were splashing about in mid-pond, kidding and fooling, the young fellows singing at the tops of their lungs in a wild chorus:
> *Amer-ica, Amer-ica, God shed his grace on thee,*
> *And crown thy good with brotherhood*
> *From sea to shi-ning sea*!

Nor can White emulate his hero's disavowal of material goods. Although he freely admits that the money he has spent on shelter and food reveals "a meanness and grossness in my nature which you would find contemptible," he cannot so easily dismiss the baseball bat he bought for his son. "You must remember that the house where you practiced the sort of economy which I respect was haunted only by mice and squirrels," White reminds Thoreau. "You never had to cope with a shortstop."

Just as White's pilgrimage to Walden is one form of a journey, so other writers have undertaken quests, by which I mean journeys that have as their object finding something lost. James Alan McPherson uses a circuitous trip to Baltimore in search of the perfect crabcakes, which he hopes to put on ice and bring back to Iowa City to share with his friends, as the structural core of his brilliant book of essays, *Crabcakes*.[7] Years ago, in planning a book about a white artist and activist named Catherine Weldon who lived with Sitting Bull and his family in the last years of his life,[8] I was stymied by a paucity of information that prevented me from recording Weldon's life in simple chronological order. Instead, I structured each chapter as a quest to find an artifact of this forgotten woman's life-the apartment in Brooklyn in which she lived before she set out for the Dakotas, the remote cabin on the reservation where she and Sitting Bull lived with his family and Weldon's own son, the portraits Weldon painted of Sitting Bull the summer before he was killed, the stretch of the Missouri River where her steamboat ran aground and her son died of lockjaw, the cemetery in Kansas City where she buried his body, and, finally, the grave in which Weldon herself lies buried. Not only did this structure provide a way to do justice to a woman about whom so little was known, it meshed with the thematic question that most concerned me: How can we unearth evidence of the lives of women and men who were lied about or ignored in their own time and forgotten or erased from history after they were dead?

Another type of quest involves a search for answers to nagging questions, as in Sue Hubbell's "The Vicksburg Ghost,"[9] in which the author describes her journey to a small Michigan town to tease out the motives behind the first reported sighting of Elvis Presley after he was dead, a sighting that allegedly occurred in September 1987 when a housewife named Louise Welling saw Elvis in Felpausch's Supermarket buying "something little—fuses, I think, not groceries."

From a journey of investigation it is easy to slip into the mystery or detective story, the classic example being Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*,[10] although an investigation might entail the search for a solution to a medical puzzle, as is true of the essays in Oliver Sacks's *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.[11] (Scientists blessed with writing talent may be rare, but even laymen can recount other people's research, as Randy Shilts accomplishes in his gripping description of the medical community's unraveling of the mystery as to what new disease was killing gay men in the late '70s and early '80s.[12])

A writer might even find the courage to formulate and carry out his or her own experiment, with an account of the experiment serving as the structure for the essay. Such an experiment requires little more than owning a pet: in "No Wonder They Call Me a Bitch," Ann Hodgman[13] samples various kinds of dog food to determine if the companies' advertising claims are true, while Elizabeth Marshall Thomas follows a friend's husky on the animal's nocturnal rounds of Cambridge to try to understand "The Hidden Life of Dogs."[14] On the surface, such an experiment is designed to answer a factual question; but the answer to that question also has to matter for deeper thematic reasons. In "How to Get Out of a Locked Trunk," Philip Weiss[15] not only

tries to figure out how to perform the mechanical act indicated by the title, he must come to understand why the threat of a living burial haunts him so badly, especially now, on the eve of his marriage to a woman he thinks he loves. Although many examples of the experimental form turn out to be humor pieces (I once had a student go a month without a bath to see if his fraternity brothers would notice his stink amid the general reek in which they lived), other examples are far more serious, as when Barbara Ehrenreich attempted to see if she could survive while working several jobs that paid the minimum wage.16

By extension, a parallel group of narrative forms describe (in third person) someone else's journey or quest or search for answers. Sebastian Junger employs this form to bestselling advantage in his account of a crew of fisherman struggling to haul in one final catch before the coming storm,17 but there's no need to write about someone who barely survived an extreme adventure—or died in the attempt. Structuring an article or a book around a day in the life of an interesting person or chronicling an expert's activities as he or she builds a violin or embalms a corpse provides an excellent way to give a piece movement and flow. As long as you formulate a question about the person or his job and use that question to decide what to include or leave out in your description of his activities, you'll have a focused and revealing profile in action.

Comparing two profiles can show how much latitude remains as far as subject and style even after the structure of a piece is fixed. In "The Stunt Pilot," Annie Dillard18 shows us the art of stunt pilot Dave Rahm, first as she watches from the ground and later as she sits in the plane behind him. But the profile contains as much of Dillard's art as Rahm's, not only in terms of elegant discursive prose that mimics the looping arcs and curves of Rahm's acrobatic flights but also the author's elaborate meditations on Art. In "Evening with a Gifted Child," Joseph Mitchell19 takes a humbler approach, sticking to an objective description of the evening he spent with a child prodigy named Philippa Duke Schulyer and her eccentric biracial parents. While trying to ascertain if Philippa is naturally gifted or whether she has been pressured to perform by an overbearing mother, Mitchell keeps his opinions to himself. Philippa serenades the author with her piano compositions and engages him in a discussion of her favorite books and comic strips, but Mitchell remains unmoved. Only when Philippa's mother shows him a poem that Philippa wrote when she was five does Mitchell break down and provide the judgment that "this was a wonderful poem." This is the extent of the meditation in the piece; Mitchell is such a master that he shapes his impressions of the evening around the question of Philippa's natural talent (or lack thereof) so carefully that the profile itself becomes a meditation on the question of the proper parental response to a prodigiously gifted child.

From the profile of a single subject it is natural to move to the portrait of a group. *Hiroshima*, John Hersey's20 portrayal of six survivors of the atomic blast that ended the second World War, not only humanized the Japanese victims of the bomb but quietly posed the question of who does or doesn't survive a nuclear catastrophe and why. The group portrait is well suited to explorations of the effects of a political event or a piece of legislation on people of various types, as can be seen in *Common Ground*, J. Anthony Lukas'21 award-winning book about the busing riots that erupted in Boston in 1974. But the form is equally appropriate for a feature-length article such as my student Mike Vitez's Pulitzer-Prize winning portrait of a handful of men and women facing death in Philadelphia in very different ways.22 The group portrait is even malleable enough for a personal essay: one of my undergraduates once compiled a collection of mini-portraits of the child-psychiatrists to whom her parents sent her when she was in junior high, each therapist so peculiar and so blind to the obvious causes of the student's mildly rebellious behavior as to raise the question of why we expect children to conform to such stringent definitions of normality when the psychologists themselves don't meet that definition.

In most group portraits, a second level of organization is needed to allow the writer to move smoothly from one member of the group to the next. In *Hiroshima*, Hersey cuts from character to character as he moves along a timeline from the moments before the blast to the hours and weeks that follow. But other schemes are possible. If a writer wants to profile a group of sailors manning a destroyer, the profiles might be grouped according to the sailors' functions on the ship, from the top of the command to the lowest swabbie.

Although chronology often plays a role within a larger structure that isn't itself a narrative (e.g., a group portrait), some of the most creative forms of nonfiction rely solely on movements through space instead of time.

Add a few members to the group, some rules for initiation or traits of commonality, and you have an essay that explores the nature of a community. On the surface, this might seem to be a description of the essay's

content rather than its structure, but as is true in most forms of nonfiction, content and structure go hand in hand. In Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*,[23] Wolfe profiles the community of top-flight test pilots by detailing the initiation that causes those pilots who apparently do not have the right stuff to wash out of the training program or crash their planes and die. By the time we are left with such elite members of the community as Chuck Yeager, Alan Shepard, Gus Grissom, and John Glenn, we understand that the selection process has created a cadre of men with sufficient moxie to beat the Russians into space. In his sad and chilling *New Yorker* essay "The Unwanted," William Finnegan[24] moves from a discussion of the social and economic factors that created a Los Angeles suburb "where schools and parents faltered (and) the American Dream was replaced by drugs, neo-Nazism, and despair" to profiles of several teenagers living in that suburb to the aftermath of a party at which one of those teenagers kills another and the community falls apart.

Although chronology often plays a role within a larger structure that isn't itself a narrative (e.g., a group portrait), some of the most creative forms of nonfiction rely solely on movements through space instead of time. Illustrations of the spatial form are easiest to see in poetry. In Book Eighteen of *The Iliad*, Homer moves around the scenes painted by Hephaistos on the five-folded shield of Achilles, using the images as a spur to his meditations on life in Greece and Troy.[25] Keats revolves his famous urn and uses the images on its sides—men pursuing women beneath an arbor of leafy trees, pipers piping timbrels, and priests sacrificing a heifer at an altar—to structure his meditations on beauty, youth, and art.[26] Similarly, writers of creative nonfiction can structure their meditations on any subject by moving spatially around a painting or a map or the photos in an album. But the structure need not come from a work of art. One of my undergraduates once structured a discussion of his peripatetic childhood by considering the child-custody clauses in his parents' divorce decree. A regular feature of *Harper's* creates a visual essay by drawing lines from various aspects of a document splayed like a butterfly on a dish to passages of text scattered around the page. Primo Levi's use of the periodic table to structure his memoir of life before, during, and after his internment at Auschwitz demonstrates the most inventive possibilities of the form.[27] James Agee's masterpiece *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*[28] is a group portrait of a community of sharecroppers in the deep South in the 1930s. But within that group portrait, Agee structures one lengthy meditation according to the table of contents of a child's geography book, while another meditation is structured by a pair of overalls.

Nor does the object around which the essay is structured need to be small, as evidenced by Joan Didion's melancholy meditation on why she can't stop thinking about the Hoover Dam.[29] At this size, the spatial structure of an essay begins to resemble a tour—of a battlefield, say, or a museum (this latter is the structure for Lawrence Weschler's quirky book, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*,[30] which takes us on a tour of the mind-bending Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles while offering a profile of its sly and elfish curator, David Wilson).

Just as the profile of a single character leads naturally to the profile of a group, so an essay structured spatially around an object leads gracefully to the consideration of a group of images. Here the writer is borrowing the structure of a lyric poem, in which a collection of related images allows the poet to explore a common theme. (See for instance Naomi Shihab Nye's "Three Pokes of a Thistle,"[31] in which the writer leads us to consider what it takes to be a good Arab girl by presenting three scenes from her childhood: the day she had a stomach ache and got sent home from school in a taxi that got rear ended by another car while her horrified mother watched; the time she and her friend Marcia visited the park near their house and were accosted by two boys who asked them if they knew "how to do the F-word"; and a birthday party at which she was presented with her first brassiere.)

Multiply the objects and add an analytical turn of mind and you have an essay or a book whose object is to decode an entire system of signs, as Paul Fussell accomplishes in *Class: A Guide through the American Status System*.[32] Again, an essay by Orwell shows how the process works; although aspects of Orwell's analysis of a line of bawdy postcards can strike a racist cord, "The Art of Donald McGill"[33] is exceptionally instructive as it details the process by which an amateur semiotician can amass and decode a collection of pop-culture signs.

Since many spatial forms depend on finding a document around which to structure one's meditations, I have always called them "found forms," but recently I discovered a more interesting description in Brenda Miller and Susan Paola's textbook *Tell It Slant*.[34] Alone among the authors of creative nonfiction texts, Miller and Paola understand the importance of structure in motivating beginning writers and providing them with more than a subject to try to emulate. Their book includes a fine discussion of the ways in which students who feel

overwhelmed by the emotional intensity of the subject they wish to write about are able to gain not only structural but emotional mastery over their material by finding an appropriate form in which to cast it. In honor of the hermit crab, which steals and inhabits the shells cast off by other creatures, Miller and Paola use the term "hermit crab essay" to describe an "essay that appropriates other forms as an outer covering to protect its soft, vulnerable underbelly.... The 'shells' come from wherever you can find them, anywhere in the world. They may borrow from fiction and poetry, but they also don't hesitate to armor themselves in more mundane structures: the descriptions in a mail order catalog, for example, or the entries in a checkbook register."

The trouble is that Miller and Paola treat the hermit-crab form—or any form except the narrative—as incidental to their discussion of the genre. That various kinds of journeys, profiles in action, group portraits, and spatial forms are central to the practice of creative nonfiction can be seen by examining the collected works of a modern master such as John McPhee. Whatever his subject, McPhee clearly takes delight in finding the form most appropriate to its exploration. This might assume the structure of a profile combined with a how-to guide and a journey in *The Survival of the Bark Canoe*,35 or a tennis match between Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner, with key points in the match intercut with scenes from the players very different lives (*Levels of the Game*36), or a Monopoly tournament juxtaposed with a journey around the very real streets of Atlantic City in a quest for the fabled but elusive Marvin Gardens.37

The only type of essay not covered so far in this essay (whose uninventive structure is basically a list) is the meditative thought-piece, in which the structure might be said to follow the author's line of reasoning on an abstract theme. This is the hardest form to emulate without the essay floating off into vague, cliched, rhetorical prose or circling around its topic for two or three pages before it dies a leaden death. Perhaps the meditative essay is simply too hard to write, or readers have grown impatient with abstract, discursive prose; whatever the cause, the purely meditative essay seems to have been edged out of magazines by its flashier, more narrative cousins.

At least, such was the theory espoused by Phillip Lopate at a panel on creative nonfiction at the recent AWP conference in Vancouver. Earlier in the presentation, Lee Gutkind, the editor of the journal *Creative Nonfiction*, had sketched his formula for successful nonfiction prose—a scene-by-scene narrative with a second, "secret" story embedded within the telling, exploring the writer's relationship to his or her material (equivalent to my notion of a central thematic question). Then Lopate took the lectern and complained that this reliance on scene-by-scene narration had ruined the entire genre of creative nonfiction by squeezing out the more meditative essay.

While I can see Lopate's point, his disagreement with Gutkind disappears when viewed from the larger perspective of form. In bestowing such heavy primacy on personal narrative, Gutkind slights the much richer possibilities of the genre. (Lopate's own essay "Portrait of My Body"38 provides a fine example of spatial forms.) And Lopate's objection that so many examples of creative nonfiction are short on meditation is less a quarrel with creative nonfiction as a genre or the personal narrative as a particular form within that genre than with the stylistic choices most writers make, their decision not to include lengthy passages of meditation, to *show* their thematic concerns rather than discuss them outright.39 Just as Raymond Carver wrote his early stories in a minimalist style, conveying the meaning of a scene by selection and indirection, Milan Kundera and other maximalists layered on philosophical meditations by the trowel-full. (Look at how much meditation the narrator of Kundera's "The Hitchhiking Game"40 hangs along the narrative spine of that story.) The same is true of nonfiction, as evidenced by the contrast between Annie Dillard's meditation-heavy profile of Dave Rahm in "The Stunt Pilot" and Joseph Mitchell's minimalist "Evening with a Gifted Child."

Any nonfiction structure can lend itself to meditation; in fact, as shown above, the interplay between a writer's central question and the form he or she chooses actually helps to *generate* meditation. At the far end of the spectrum, the structural seeds of the meditation may be compressed to such an extent that the reader barely recognizes the structure's presence or the ways in which it served to generate the meditation. To see how this works, look at that old standby for composition courses suggested in the early 1980s by Ken Macrorie in *The I-Search Paper*.41 You send your freshmen to the library to peruse periodicals from the day or week that they were born, with instructions that they find an interesting invention or event that exerted a significant effect on their lives (or the lives of their generation as a whole). Most students respond to the assignment by incorporating into their essays the excitement of the search, how one item jumped out from the mass of print, how this article or that ad prompted the student to consider the effect of an invention or an

event on his or her life. (I once had a student who could have passed for white but was in fact the son of a black mother and a white father; while reading magazines from the week of his birth, he discovered that his parents' marriage-an act of miscegenation-had been illegal in the state they lived in, a discovery that shocked him into a lengthy consideration of exactly how brave and rebellious his parents must have been.)

In Charles Baxter's meditative essay "Dysfunctional Narratives: or: Mistakes Were Made,"[42] we see no evidence that the author needed to make a trip to the library to remind him that Richard Nixon's infamous nonadmission of wrongdoing in the Watergate scandal exerted a pall of moral passivity over the generations that followed, in literary as well as political terms. Yet we can reconstruct the way in which the essay's meditations were occasioned by a reading of Nixon's autobiography *RN*; in other words, Baxter is so adept at the meditative essay that he can compress the structure described by Macrorie down to the barest kernel and allow his meditations to explode outward, popcorn-wise, from there. Nor did Terry Tempest Williams need to visit the library to realize that the atomic tests she and her family witnessed in Utah when she was a girl were likely responsible for the high incidence of breast cancer among her relatives; all she needed was her father's verification of a memory of the blast that Williams previously had considered a dream. Yet that cause-and-effect structure is only lightly buried in Williams' chilling essay "The Clan of One-Breasted Women."[43]

Of course, no one ever sat down to write an essay because he or she wanted to demonstrate a given form of creative nonfiction. The impetus for any piece of writing, fiction or nonfiction or poetry, has to be the author's passion for the subject. But once the writer has found that subject, knowing that it can be categorized as history or politics or science provides little help in carrying out the research, finding the thematic focus, and structuring the finished piece. Having a toolbox full of structures and the ability to invent new forms as needed allows the experienced writer to select, invent, or combine the forms required to shape a piece, with all the intellectual and aesthetic satisfactions such mastery can bestow.

AWP

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NOTES

1. Much of what I know about the forms of creative nonfiction I learned from John Hersey, who was my teacher at Yale in the mid 1970s.
2. George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant." *Eight Modern Essayists*. 4th ed. Ed. William Smart. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 31–41.
3. E.B. White, "Death of a Pig." *Eight Modern Essayists*. 4th ed. Ed. William Smart. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 97–105.
4. As a writing coach, I used to watch talented reporters amass notebooks of fascinating research, then sweat and smoke their way to a massive first draft, then weep in frustration as editor after editor called up this beast on a computer screen and pronounced it "lacking in focus" or "disorganized." Each editor would move around some paragraphs, give the reporter some suggestions then pass the article to the next editor, who would move around a few more paragraphs and make the creature even more ungainly. The feature would swim for months in the murky depths of cyberspace, surfacing now and then on an editor's screen but never appearing in print. Sharks, I began to call them. Mutant, disfigured sharks, swimming the murky depths, searching for their proper form. Such dangers are even worse for books. Although an experienced writer might focus a book around two or more related questions and employ more than one form to organize his material, the novice who starts a book with neither a structure nor a central question is almost guaranteed to become overwhelmed and lose his way.
5. Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (Boston: David. R. Godine, 1982).
6. E.B. White, "Walden." *Eight Modern Essayists*. 4th ed. Ed. William Smart. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 90–96.
7. James Alan McPherson, *Crabcakes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).
8. Eileen Pollack, *Woman Walking Ahead: In Search of Catherine Weldon and Sitting Bull* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).

9. Sue Hubbell, "The Vicksburg Ghost." *From Here to There and Back Again* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 52-70.
10. TrumanCapote, *In Cold Blood* (New York: Vintage Reprint Edition, 1994).
11. Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Perennial Library, 1987).
12. Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).
13. Ann Hodgman, "No Wonder They Call Me a Bitch." *Best American Essays*, College Edition. 2nd ed. Ed. Robert Atwan. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 228-233.
14. Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, *The Hidden Life of Dogs* (New York: Pocket Books, 1996).
15. Philip Weiss, "How to Get Out of a Locked Trunk." *The Best American Essays*, College Edition. Ed. Robert Atwan. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995).
16. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).
17. Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm: A True Story of Men against the Sea* (New York: Norton, 1997).
18. Annie Dillard, "The Stunt Pilot." *Best American Essays*, College Edition. 2nd ed. Ed. Robert Atwan. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 178–190.
19. Joseph Mitchell, "Evening with a Gifted Child." *Up in the Old Hotel* (New York: Vintage, 1993).
20. John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: Vintage, 1989).
21. Anthony J. Lukas, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (New York: Knopf, 1985).
22. Mike Vitez, "Final Choices, Seeking the Good Death." *Philadelphia Inquirer*. 18–22 Nov, 1996 (also available at www.pulitzer.org).
23. Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979).
24. William Finnegan, "The Unwanted." *The New Yorker*. 1 Dec. 1997: 61–78.
25. Homer, *The Iliad*. Trans. Richard Lattimore. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 388–391; I owe this example to John Hersey.
26. John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn." *The Selected Poetry of Keats* (New York: New American Library, 1966), 252.
27. Levi, Primo. *The Periodic Table*. Trans. Raymond Rosenthal. (New York: Schocken Books, 1984).
28. James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).
29. Joan Didion, "At the Dam." *Eight Modern Essayists*, 4th ed. Ed. William Smart. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 247–249.
30. Lawrence Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* (New York: Pantheon, 1995).
31. Naomi Shihab Nye, "Three Pokes of a Thistle." *Never in a Hurry: Essays on People and Places* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).
32. Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide through the American Status System* (New York: Summit Books, 1983).
33. George Orwell, "The Art of Donald McGill." *Eight Modern Essayists*. 4th ed. Ed. William Smart. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 48-57.
34. Brenda Miller and Susan Paola, *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004).
35. John McPhee, *The Survival of the Bark Canoe* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975).
36. John McPhee, *Levels of the Game* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979).
37. John McPhee, "The Search for Marvin Gardens." *The John McPhee Reader*. Ed. William Howarth. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), 309–320.
38. Phillip Lopate, "Portrait of My Body." *Getting Personal: Selected Writings* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 327-334.
39. This is a perspective that Lopate himself seems to take in a recent essay in which he laments the reluctance of his students to engage in reflection in their personal narratives or even to use the sort of retrospective narrator who would make such reflection possible. Such reluctance, of course, would prevent students from using the meditative mode in creative nonfiction no matter the form, whether narrative or not. See Lopate, Phillip. "Reflection and Retrospection: A Pedagogic Mystery Story." *Fourth Genre* Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring 2005. 143–156.
40. Milan Kundera, "The Hitchhiking Game." *Laughable Loves* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 77–106.
41. Ken Macrorie, *The I-Search Paper* (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1988).
42. Charles Baxter, "Dysfunctional Narratives: or: Mistakes Were Made." *Burning Down the House* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 1997), 3–25.

43. Terry Tempest Williams, "The Clan of One-Breasted Women." *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 281–290.

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