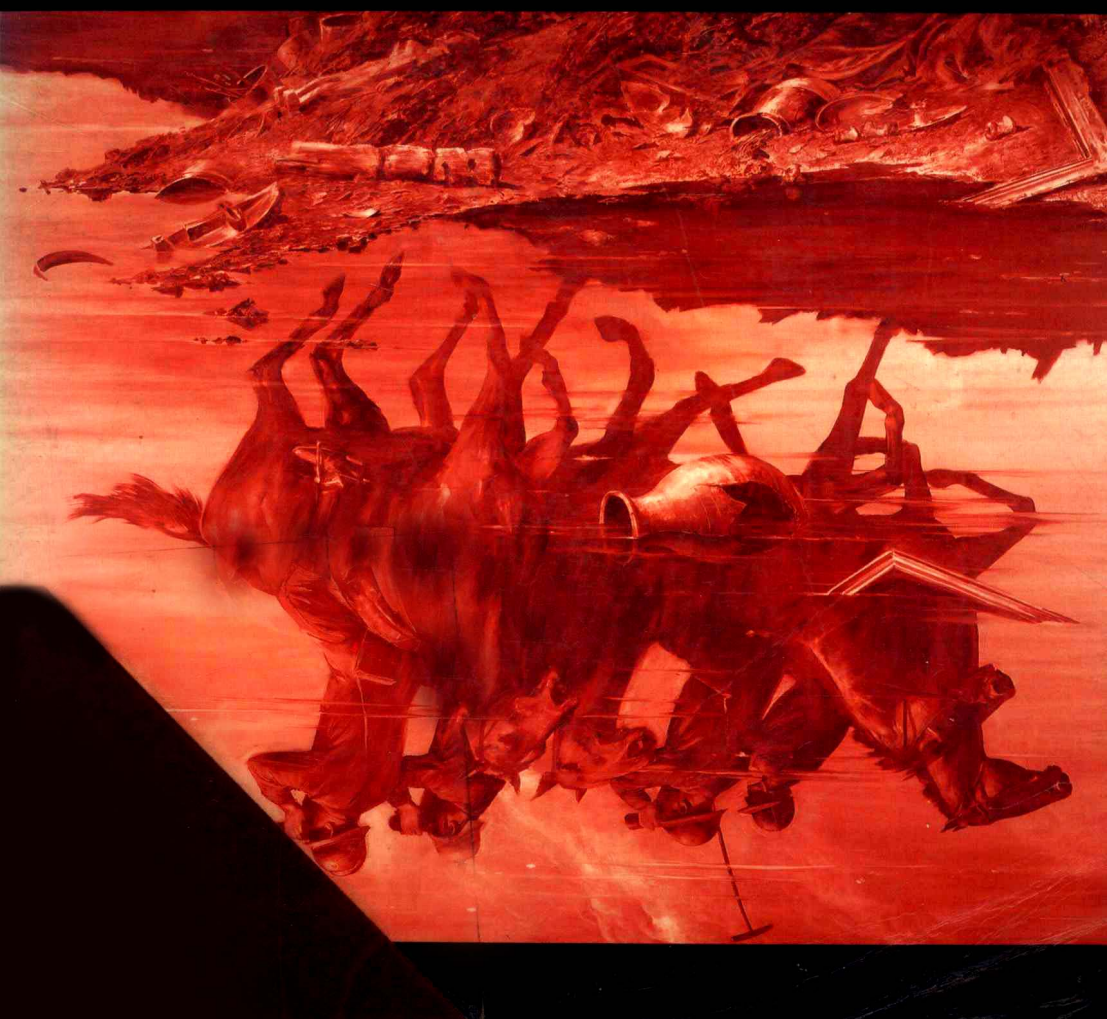
Representing Reality

Readings in Literary Nonfiction

JOHN WARNOCK



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To my mother and father, with gratitude and love

• PREFACE •

In *Representing Reality*, I hope to help teachers create with their students a place for reading and writing literary nonfiction.

Literary nonfiction needs no argument for readers. Travel writing, narrative history, biography, autobiography, writing about nature, writing about culture, literary journalism, and literary documentary all have wide and enthusiastic readerships, among young people and adults. Among the readers who enjoy literary nonfiction, however, are some who may not consider reading it a serious undertaking. Serious reading, they believe, takes place when they read nonliterary nonfiction in their fields, or when they read "literature," that is, fiction of the sort that is sponsored by English departments. Literary nonfiction is something read outside of one's field, even if one's field is literature. It is recreational reading.

Nevertheless, in English departments, certain older works of literary nonfiction are agreed-upon classics in the Western tradition: Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Plutarch's *Lives*, Augustine's *Confessions*, and, among more recent works, Henry Adams's *Education*, and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Works like these are recognized as demanding and important, not just because of the nonfictional material they contain, but because of their literary achievement.

Representing Reality includes portions of a number of recognized classics to help the reader recognize that literary nonfiction has a distinguished tradition. But the richness, the skill, and the artistry of many of the more recent works of literary nonfiction are also worthy of recognition and of study, and some of these works are included as well.

If literary nonfiction is enjoyable as literary art, it is also intensely problematic as truth, that is, as a representation of reality. Literary nonfiction can always be questioned for its factuality, but factuality is just one of the problems that may arise. Accuracy is a duty, said Oscar Wilde, not a virtue. Virtue in literary nonfiction presumably comes from other qualities, such as thoroughness, justice, honesty, sympathy, and courage, not to mention virtues that might be thought aesthetic—grace, elegance, depth, vividness. To question the truth of a representation is to question more than whether it got its facts right. *Representing Reality* aims to put students in a position to ask such questions and to reject too-easy answers to such questions.

THE PLACE OF LITERARY NONFICTION IN THE CURRICULUM

Representing Reality is suitable for classes in literary nonfiction or the literature of fact. It is also suitable for composition courses, at beginning or advanced levels, depending on the particular constituency of students. Some journalism instructors will find that the book suits their purposes also.

In colleges and universities today, literary nonfiction is most often encountered in freshman English classes and, more recently, in writing across the disciplines program. In both situations, classes tend to concentrate on the essay and on expository or academic writing. Literary nonfiction, as defined in this book, is both broader and narrower than these conceptions. Literary nonfiction may include both essay and exposition, but it tends to place these in the context of a story. At the very least, it includes stories as an important part of its discourse. In other words, literary nonfiction does not simply analyze and describe some aspect of reality; rather, it attempts to represent reality in a narrative that the reader is intended to experience, not just to understand.

This is not to say that literary nonfiction is nonacademic writing, although most of it does not look like most research papers. The concept of literary nonfiction simply invites the recognition that the writing being considered has literary dimensions. Although all writing has literary dimensions in a sense, whether or not the writer knows it, literary nonfiction makes more of this fact than does conventional academic writing.

Courses in various kinds of nonfiction and the literature of fact have begun to appear at the upper division in English departments. Their appearance is part of a growing recognition that conventional definitions of literature need to be modified, while conventional notions of writing need to be revised. The former needs to shed its limitation to works of fiction and high culture, while the latter needs to recognize more fully the implications of the act of writing. *Representing Reality* is intended to promote both of these developments.

SELECTION AND ORGANIZATION OF THE READINGS

The richness of literary nonfiction is amazing. Rather than presume to represent all that there is, I have chosen readings that seem to raise interesting problems and that resonate in interesting ways with each other. The selections are not arbitrary, but they are certainly not the only possible ones.

Many of the selections are self-contained excerpts from longer works. I believe it is important to give students a taste of some of the longer works of literary nonfiction, even though the part is not the

whole and may not adequately represent the whole. The introductions to each selection hint at what may be in store for those who read the complete work. In my own classes, I try to encourage students to read at least one longer work all the way through.

The selections are organized into chapters that follow the order in which a particular kind of writing appeared: travel writing first, then history, biography, autobiography, writing about nature, writing about culture, literary journalism, and literary documentary. As we approach the modern period, the historical sequence is less well-defined, and the generic categories less clearly consolidated. For example, writing about culture and literary documentary are not established literary genres in the same way that biography and history are, although the writing that appears under those headings is no less impressive for that.

None of the generic categories is perfectly clear-cut: every chapter includes selections that challenge any easy conception of the limits of that particular kind of writing. For example, is an account of a life told by the subject to another who writes it down in the subject's own words biography or autobiography? Is "oral history" history? There are no correct answers to such questions, although some arguments will be more persuasive than others.

Representing Reality offers a general introduction about the status of literary nonfiction and provides introductions to each genre as well. These introductions offer a historical context and raise some of the interesting questions that pertain to the particular genre—questions having to do with the subjects with which the genre deals, the positions assumed by writers in the genre, and the structures which the writers employ. A final section in each introduction—The Story of the Story—reminds students that the accounts they are about to read have their own history of composition.

The book does not provide specific questions for the discussion of the readings, but such questions are implied in the introductions. The Instructor's Manual, however, includes for each reading some questions that I've found to work well, and it offers accounts of some discussions I have had in my classes. Finally, however, the questions that will work best in a class are those that belong to the teacher and student.

THE PLACE OF WRITING IN THIS READER

After each chapter introduction, and before the readings, writing assignments called Points of Departure are provided. These assignments attempt to put students in positions similar to those of the writers represented in that chapter. The Points of Departure have several purposes: to prepare students to read what follows, to provide

occasions for regular writing throughout the course, and to give students ideas for writing projects they might pursue in more extended ways.

The Points of Departure often invite the use of personal experience, but they are not intended to provide occasions only for self-expression or personal writing, as those terms are often defined. Instead, they try to harness the ubiquitous motive toward self-expression in order to develop a more general literary power. They also invite students to undertake writing—real writing, not exercises—upon which their later reading might impinge. The reading that follows upon such writing might be called "writerly" reading. It differs significantly from the "readerly" reading that is called for when "comprehension" is the principal goal and when the writing asked for is intended to be primarily a test of comprehension.

To summarize, *Representing Reality* treats nonfiction as literature, literature as writing, and writing as a literary undertaking. For the past eight years, I have taught courses in literary nonfiction that embody these commitments, never teaching the same class twice. Although I do not have all the answers to how literary nonfiction is best taught and learned, I do know that my students have found this material accessible, demanding, and important, and that they have been eager to take up the challenge of writing literary nonfiction. I hope other teachers can experience some of the delights I have experienced with students as a teacher in these classes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 1983, Don Murray saw some materials I had written up for my Literature of Fact class, and said, "You ought to write a book." And, some years later, when I had a pile of readings that I knew I had to cut by half but wasn't sure I could—they were all such good stuff! they worked so well together!—Don spread it out on the ping-pong table in the basement, pulled up a chair, and for an afternoon showed me how he would do it. Thanks, Don, for these and all the other lessons in teaching and writing.

Thanks to all the people in all the places inside and outside the academy who shared with me their enthusiasms for particular works of literary nonfiction, and for a book like this one. We don't always find that our aspirations make that kind of sense to others. Thanks particularly to John Ackerman, Lynn Bloom, Geoff Chase, Herb Dieterich, John Dorst, Lester Faigley, Dick Fleck, Betsy Hilbert, Nancy Hines, Fred Homer, Carolyn Intemann, Jane Nelson, Charles Pelkey, Mary Pratt, Linda Robertson, Renato Rosaldo, Charles Schuster, Ross Winterowd, and Douglas Warnock.

Thanks to the editors and reviewers at St. Martin's Press who exerted themselves in an effort to raise this work above the level to which I sometimes must have seemed determined to sink it. I hope your efforts do not now seem to you to have been entirely vain; you had a hard case.

Thanks to the many students who read versions of the introductions I wrote for this book and who took me at my word when I said that I wanted these drafts to be read as drafts. You astonished me with your ability to help me find places where the writing could be made better. It is not just these pages that you helped me with; you helped me believe in what you as students could do as readers and writers if I as a teacher could find ways of letting you do it.

Thanks to Patsy Twitchell for the help with permissions and Esther Winter and Kurt Meyer for the research.

Tilly, of all that might be said, simply, thanks.

John Warnock

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INTRODUCTION
What Is Literary Nonfiction?

We should honor a fact; it may flower into a truth.
Henry David Thoreau

There is an eternal feud between poetry and philosophy.
Plato

[F]ew people ask of books what books can give us. Most commonly we come to books with a blurred and divided mind, asking of fiction that it be true, of poetry that it shall be false, of biography that it shall be flattering, of history that it shall enforce our own prejudices.
Virginia Woolf

Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function it is to specify the proper use of a cultural artifact.
Frederic Jameson

Works of literary nonfiction may be defined as those that aspire to be both factual and true. These two values, however, are not the same thing. Works of fiction are not factual, but they can be true in that they represent a state of affairs that we recognize as potentially, perhaps profoundly, true. On the other hand, works of fact can distort the truth, as, for example, some newspaper reports are accused of doing. By itself, a list of facts may be accurate, but such a list lacks the kind of truth that may be found in works of history, or biography, or documentary. When a work reflects an aspiration to be both factual and true, it satisfies a necessary condition for literary nonfiction.

But what is factuality, and how is it established? One of the most common and persuasive ways to establish factuality is by personal observation: "I was there; I saw it myself." Not all facts can be established in this way, however. Often we rely on others whom we

believe to be trustworthy and in a position to know the facts. We talk to people. We do research. We find documents or other evidence—birth certificates, photographs, letters, bits of rag and bone—that help us establish the facts. We do this to establish that the claim we are making about the way things are or were can be independently verified. Writers of autobiography may consult only their memories, but all writers of literary nonfiction consult something beyond the world of the text they are creating. They hold themselves responsible to a world that lies beyond their own imaginations.

Establishing the facts may take a good deal of time and effort, and particular questions of fact may never be resolved. But once research and argument have established a particular claim as a fact, it is not likely to be disputed further—for the time being. Our inclination to dispute the facts may change, however. It was once accepted as a fact, for example, that the earth was the center of the universe. Thus, it may be more prudent to define an assertion of fact as an assertion that will be accepted as indisputable, in a particular situation, rather than as an assertion that is and always will be indisputable.

Consider the following fact: "Columbus discovered America in 1492." A test of the factuality of an assertion is that it is not likely to be disputed, and this assertion seemingly meets that test. But why do we say that Columbus discovered *America*? It wasn't America yet, was it? Furthermore, why do we say that *Columbus* discovered America? Was he the first man on board his ship to see it? Even if he was, what do we mean by *discovered*? America was already populated when Columbus arrived. It might be better to say that Columbus began the European "invasion" of America. But others from the European side had already been there, so he didn't even begin that. Whatever Columbus did, can we at least say that he did it in 1492? Perhaps, but what is the Christian calendar but one of many possible fictions we might have devised to mark time? The Aztecs then ruling in Mexico would not have said that what Columbus did happened in 1492.

Fiction is thus deeply implicated in statements of fact, although perhaps not so deeply implicated as in claims of truth. Truth, we are likely to think, is more the product of inference and interpretation than are facts. Even though the truth, unlike opinion, is independent of any particular person's belief in it, it is not something we can know with the kind of certainty that attaches itself to facts. Except in cases where truth is taken to be a matter of faith and thus, by definition, beyond the reach of rational inquiry, the truth is attainable only through the work of interpretation, and is thus always arguable.

Literary nonfiction aspires to factuality and truth, but fulfilling this aspiration is clearly not a simple matter.

To distinguish literary nonfiction from nonliterary nonfiction (that is, from exposition, the research paper, technical writing), we will make an additional distinction: literary nonfiction is nonfiction that emphasizes story, or narrative—accounts of action in time. Literary nonfiction may include essay or exposition, but it tends to place these in the context of a story. At the very least, it includes stories as an important part of its discourse. With literary nonfiction, as with fiction, readers are meant not just to understand what an account is about, but to experience something directly related to what the account is about.

The analytical scheme that defines literary nonfiction as a factual representation of the truth in narrative form provides a starting point for our consideration of literary nonfiction. But we should beware of assuming that we will find actual literary works that are either pure fiction or pure fact, purely literary or purely nonliterary. We must remember too that literary nonfiction and factual statements themselves are representations of reality, not reality itself.

Mark Tansey's painting *Forward Retreat* appears on the cover of this book. It plays intriguingly with the discrepancy between representations of reality and reality itself. Seeing the painting (is it a painting or a photograph?) for the first time, we may wonder if it hasn't been hung (or printed) upside down. But in a moment, we see that everything's all right; the image we see is the *reflection* of the event taking place on the shore above. What this event is is still a little unclear, but it involves horses and helmeted men and a polo mallet. It's probably a game of some kind. But where is it being played? Polo isn't played on the shores of dumps, and it looks like we must be in such a place, with all that junk (frames? urns? art objects?) floating in a reflective medium that is none too pure.

Perhaps one way to find out what's really going on onshore is to turn the picture over. Unfortunately, our questions about what is going on are multiplied by what we now see: riders mounted "the wrong way" on their horses, helmets that "belong" to war (games?) that are now history, and impossible positions for the horses given the laws of motion in physics—well, not impossible in art, obviously. Is the artist reminding us that even when the eye is seeing "the thing itself," the image is reversed on the retina, and then reversed again in the brain? Is he suggesting that no matter how we turn our representations around, we will never be able to escape such mediation and see "the thing itself as it really is"?

Representing Reality invites you to deal not just with the reality that may be presumed to lie beyond any representations of it in literary nonfiction, but with the representations themselves. It invites you to pay attention to the qualities of the works, and not just to the

the relationship between the works and what they represent. Put another way, when we look at literary nonfiction as literature, we are interested not only in the information in it, but in the writing of it.

This book delineates eight kinds of literary nonfiction: travel writing, history, biography, autobiography, writing about nature, writing about culture, literary journalism, and literary documentary. These are offered in the order of their historical appearance.

Each chapter begins with an introduction to the particular genre of literary nonfiction. These introductions are meant not just to provide background, but to suggest some of the kinds of questions that may be asked as you read. Good readers are not those who passively receive information from texts, but those who ask good questions of texts. The questions in each introduction concern the subjects dealt with by the particular kind of nonfiction, the positions assumed by its writers, the structures employed by those writers, and finally—in a section called The Story of the Story—the processes of research and composition employed by the writers.

It is important to remember, however, that the categories used here are not absolute. In fact, I have built into this book a certain lack of neatness. Each chapter contains at least one work that raises questions about the limits of the genre being considered. I believe that what we label a work is not as important as what we are able to see it as doing. Labels sometimes help us to see what works are doing, but when we apply labels uncritically, they can interfere with our seeing.

The book also contains writing assignments, called Points of Departure, before the readings in each chapter. These assignments are intended not as exercises or tests of comprehension, but as opportunities for real writing. They will put you in positions similar to those of the writers whose works you are about to read and thus may help you develop questions about your reading. The assignments may also help you formulate ideas for more extended writing projects to be undertaken in class, or even outside of it.

My own experience and my experience with students have led me to believe that literary nonfiction is a wonderful resource for readers and writers. I hope you find it so.

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• ONE •

TRAVEL WRITING

[Travel] is not a category—it is more like a whole way of life.
Paul Theroux

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
T. S. Eliot

I hate travelling and explorers. . . . [W]hat do we find in travel books? We are told the exact number of packing-cases that was required, or about the misdemeanors of the ship's dog, and, interspersed among the anecdotes, are scraps of hackneyed information which have appeared in every textbook during the past fifty years and are presented with remarkable effrontery (an effrontery nevertheless perfectly in keeping with the naivety and ignorance of the audience) as valid evidence or even original discoveries.
Claude Lévi-Strauss

Before tourism there was travel, and before travel there was exploration. . . . All three make journeys, but the explorer seeks the undiscovered, the traveler that which has been discovered by the mind working in history, the tourist that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him by the arts of publicity. . . . If the explorer moves toward the risks of the formless and the unknown, the tourist moves toward pure cliché.
Paul Fussell