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## Life-Writing in an Age of Postmodernism: A Corderian Rhetoric of Creative Nonfiction

James S. Baumlin | Missouri State University

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**Abstract** | In the lifeworld that we experience from within and share with others, there are some things that we don't know, some things that we can't know, some things that we don't need to know, and some things that we don't want to know (or, perhaps, to admit). Parsing these differences marks the delicate artistry of creative nonfiction (CNF). Whereas fiction (as figured in the contemporary novel) has less need to censor its depictions of character, creative nonfiction must balance honesty (toward one's subject) with authenticity (toward oneself), intimacy (toward one's reader), and privacy (toward details of one's lifeworld). Embracing an "ethic of care" (Nussbaum; Noddings) aids the CNF author in balancing these competing claims: It is not "the Truth," but health and community, that contemporary CNF seeks in its narrative artistry. For a model of successful CNF, this paper turns to Jim W. Corder, a late-20<sup>th</sup> century pioneer in postmodernist life-writing. Fusing Corderian rhetoric with an ethic of care, this essay ends with a series of aphorisms supportive of Corderian practice. Along the way, it makes use of Corder's own scholarly habit of autoethnography—that is, of incorporating personal narrative within cultural/textual analysis.

**Keywords** | Creative Nonfiction (CNF), Consciousness, Lifeworld, Intimacy, Ethic of Care, Jim W. Corder, Corderian Rhetoric, Postmodernism, Narrative, Autoethnography

## Storytelling before CNF

[W]e make the fictions that are our lives.

—Jim W. Corder, “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love” (17)

Tell all the truth but tell it slant.

—Emily Dickinson

“Things were simpler back then.”

—My uncle

Is there anyone whose uncle (or aunt, or grandparent) *didn't* say something like that last epigraph, above? Let's say that the world longed for, the “back then” of my uncle's nostalgic dreaming, follows World War II: 1955, let's call the year. For me, that would mean crawling back into the womb, for that's the year I was born. By my sixth or seventh year, television had taught me that the Nazis had been defeated; the discourse of American democracy had carried the day. I had heard of communism, which was telling a different story about the world than our own. But surely it, like fascism, would burn up in the crucible of Truth: That's what my parents, teachers, movies, television, and popular culture generally were teaching me, and no “real American” would hold otherwise. People's opinions might differ over details, but Truth itself was the final arbiter and Truth had its authorities—political, religious, social, intellectual—to police and protect it.

Back then, my uncle owned a restaurant in central New Jersey. He had been a cook in the army, so his military skills were put to use. He would have told you that the Truth of his world was American, Catholic, self-employed, married, middle class. And he loved telling stories about his life growing up near the railroad tracks in his hometown of Perth Amboy, across from the NYC borough of Staten Island in Raritan Bay. Most Sundays of my early school years—from 1960, say, through 1969, when my mother's father died—our families would gather at my grandmother's house for supper. We children would gather around his chair and my uncle would tell us the heroic adventure stories of his youth; then we'd eat, and then we'd settle in the living room to watch Walt Disney's “Wonderful World of Color” on a black-and-white TV. (Every year of my childhood, they showed *The Wizard of Oz* on TV, and every year I watched it on a black-and-white set. Only as an adult would I experience that same surprise and delight that people felt back in 1939, when Dorothy's black-and-white Kansas transformed into the dazzling colors of Oz—for *The Wizard* was one of the first films in color.)

Some of my uncle's stories were fantastical, almost Oz-like. Heroes and villains were easily identifiable. Some of his stories were polaroid-snapshots of life itself. My uncle knew the world he lived in as well as he knew himself. And words never failed him in the telling. He loved his wife—genuinely, I can say. If you had talked to him in his

later years, he would have told you that he loved and cared for his son, too, though his son might occasionally have thought otherwise. My uncle was being patriotic back in 1968, when he grabbed me off the city street and dragged me into a barber shop for a haircut. (“America: Love It or Leave It” was a popular bumper-sticker sentiment back then, to which my uncle vociferously agreed.) In Vietnam at that time, the Tet Offensive—the war’s largest conventional military campaign—was in full swing.<sup>1</sup> I did manage to escape from the barber, preserving my hippie-wannabe hair. When his restaurant burned down sometime in the early 1960s, my uncle opened a tavern; when that suffered fire damage sometime in the 1970s, he opened a deli. He was the American Dream incarnate: civic-minded, a church goer, self-employed, a family man.

In his old age, my uncle turned to writing. Every second week or so he would compose a letter to the editor of the local newspaper, which published some of his nuggets of political, economic, and social conservatism. It wasn’t until the last year of his life—1997, if I’m remembering correctly—that my uncle told me of the owner of the bowling alley adjacent to his restaurant. “You got fire insurance?” the guy asked him. “No,” my uncle said. “Get some.” And he did. And the bowling alley went up in flames a few months later, taking the restaurant with it. I don’t know why he told me that; it confused me, frankly. His stories, always heroic, had never been confessional. It was an uncharacteristic gesture of intimacy that made me feel complicit, somehow, in his lifeworld. It changed my view of him.

And then, some summers ago—though years after his passing—my mother reminded me of two other fires, one in the shed behind the tavern, one in the apartment above. That’s all I know to say. Truth is messy: It bangs against other claims to our loyalties, like family, friendship, love, security, self-image. Whether there’s more to the story, I cannot know. As I’ve said, my uncle passed away years ago and, more recently, so has my mother, his sister. He was funny, kind to me, and my mother loved him: Such is my memory of my uncle.

As a one-time editor of a small academic press, I have received more than a few manuscripts written by other people’s uncles. Typically, they present history and biography as simple, nonproblematic, monochromatic. They idealize their lives, their worlds, their forebears. And they write from a standpoint of moral certitude. They are, in sum, masters of their texts. They write—the Truth. Or, more accurately, they write that part of the Truth that consorts with their idealized self-image and worldview. As a rule, I’ve returned their manuscripts with a brief, polite rejection letter. I do not tell them that their version of the world may have been publishable in 1955 or 1968, but not now.

### **“The Power of the Regime” vs. “The Power of Freedom”**

Each of us forms conceptions of the world, its institutions, its public, private, wide, or local histories, and each of us is the narrative that shows our living in

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<sup>1</sup>From January 31 through March 28, 1968, the North Vietnamese People’s Army conducted an all-out campaign across the length of South Vietnam, attacking a hundred towns and cities and some military bases. Though the Tet Offensive failed militarily for the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies, the bloody news coverage served to turn American popular sentiment against the war, leading to a negotiated withdrawal of American forces. With that withdrawal, the South Vietnamese capital, Saigon, fell on April 10, 1975 (see James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive*).

and through the conceptions that are always being formed as the tales of our lives take their shape. In this history-making, as E. L. Doctorow says, “there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction.” There is only our making, sometimes by design, sometimes not. None of us lives without a history; each of us is a narrative.

—Jim W. Corder, “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love” (16)

“Each of us,” Corder tells us, “is a narrative.” Within this recognition, the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction dissolve. For any attempt at constructing a coherent history, biography, or world-picture is grounded in narrative: Such is the reigning linguistic/epistemological premise of postmodernism, which Jean-François Lyotard taught us back in 1979.<sup>2</sup>

In the essay, “False Documents” (1977)—which Corder cites in the epigraph above—E. L. Doctorow distinguishes between “two kinds of power in language.” There’s “the power of the regime,” which lays claim to the fact-world, to objective history, and to a stable social reality; and there’s “the power of freedom,” which reimagines the human social-material lifeworld (152). The “regime language,” Doctorow notes, “derives its strength from what we are supposed to be,” whereas the power unleashed in a language of freedom “consists in what we threaten to become” (152). This freedom-to-become belongs to fiction, which serves to challenge the ideologies lurking in “regime language.” As Doctorow writes, “What we proclaim as the discovered factual world can be challenged as the questionable world we ourselves have painted—the cultural museum of our values, dogmas, assumptions, that prescribes for us not only what we may like and dislike, believe and disbelieve, but also what we may be permitted to see *and not to see*” (152; emphasis added). I would argue that this same freedom-to-become extends to contemporary CNF, which poses similar challenges to the “cultural museum” and its embedded ideologies.

Described within an existentialist vocabulary, contemporary CNF harnesses the narrative structures and stylistic techniques of fiction while remaining tied to the lifeworld (or *Lebenswelt*, as Edmund Husserl puts it). Put simplistically, the lifeworld *is*: It’s what exists materially in time and space, providing us with our sense of “the real.” The lifeworld exists prior to language, though its human meaning unfolds within a continuous process of interpretation, valuation, and response. Imagining what “is possible,” fiction creates a “parallel reality” to the lifeworld, whereas CNF interprets, values, and responds to the lifeworld-as-given. The artistry of CNF aims to make “the real world” *more real* to us by sharpening our tools of perception, discrimination, interpretation, valuation, and response. Still, the very term, “real world,” immerses us in

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<sup>2</sup>See Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. This epoch-driving shift in epistemology made its way into sociological theories of selfhood: “The existential question of self-identity,” writes Anthony Giddens, “is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual ‘supplies’ about herself” (54). Giddens continues, “A person’s identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to *keep a particular narrative going*. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain a regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self” (54).

the linguistic/epistemological crisis of postmodernism.<sup>3</sup> *Mundus est fabula*—"the world is a tale"—was a motto of the French philosopher of subjectivity, René Descartes. Our ways of knowing are tied to our ways of telling.

### The Partial Truth of Language

When you learn strong lessons early, however wrong, no evidence seems to count against them.

—Jim W. Corder, "Lessons Learned, Lessons Lost" (23)

We make truth, if at all, out of what is incomplete or partial.

—Jim W. Corder, "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love" (31)

By its nature, storytelling is imperfect, a partial revealing. A lifeworld's complete rendering would take a piling-on of words upon words. But we don't speak or write polyphonically; rather, our speech unfolds linearly as a fugue, one word at a time. Necessarily, then, "language enforces a closure" (Corder, "Argument" 18): "We must say one thing or the other; we choose, and make our narrative" (18). This limitation in language compels us to make selections among details, revealing some while concealing others; in effect, we scatter shards of experience throughout our texts, leaving traces of self. But while we lurk in our stories, aspects of our lifeworld remain hidden, in whole or in part.

Within CNF, we can commit to telling "the truth"—which is as much to say, all the truth we have at hand or can recover, test, and preserve. But we have still to learn ways of "slanting" the tale of it, balancing artistry—the literary "creativity" embedded in "creative nonfiction"—against honesty, intimacy, and authenticity. "Things were simpler back then," I've quoted my uncle as saying. I doubt very much that things were ever simpler in any "back then," whether my uncle's or my grandparent's or my own; it's *the ways of telling* that make them seem so. Laying aside his one confession, my uncle's stories were politically and ideologically unconscious, dismissive of contradiction, and insensitive to the ethical difficulties lurking underneath.

Postmodernism awakens us to the competing voices contained within the cultural museum. The dominant discourse uses regime language as a means to power, wielding authority over attitudes and social relations. The "what is" of material-social reality reduces to what the regime says it is. "America: Love It or Leave It." "Go to church." "Get a job." "Get a haircut." In its varied voices, the museum speaks through our uncles.

My mentor in CNF, Jim W. Corder (1929–1998), belonged to my uncle's generation. In our scholarly collaborations, I was the junior professor.<sup>4</sup> He introduced me as his son on a couple of occasions when we were together in public—a fiction that I found flattering. Corder's military service came in 1950–1951 in occupied Germany, and

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<sup>3</sup>As Richard Rorty describes the so-called "linguistic turn" of poststructuralism, "we need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there [...]. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations [...]. The world does not speak. Only we do" (*Contingency* 4–5). For Rorty's seminal discussion, see his *Linguistic Turn*.

<sup>4</sup>He taught at Texas Christian University for many years, rising to dean and vice chancellor; I taught there with him for a few years before moving to Missouri.



he carried around in his head many of the same introjected voices that my uncle heard, though he came to recognize their danger. His essay, “Lessons Learned, Lessons Lost” (1992), is devoted to the topic:

How do you remember guilt, disgrace, honorable victory, honorable defeat, and success if the way you first learned them was maybe altogether wrong and certainly altogether mismatched to a world that any soul ever lived in? When persuasive people and daily evidence both testify otherwise, how do you continue to believe [...] that love is always accompanied by chivalric behavior, that the WASP family of 1934 is the appropriate goal of nostalgic dreaming, that true believers will at last be saved? (23)<sup>5</sup>

Such is the grand project of Corderian CNF: The unmasking of ideologies, as told within stories of the lies one was taught (in childhood primarily) and of the need to correct those lies and recover from them. In unmasking ideologies, Corderian CNF seeks authenticity while remaining humane, caring, and accommodating.<sup>6</sup> But there’s a further unmasking explored in this version of contemporary CNF, one pertaining to the author’s own self-identity.

In ways rarely confronted by novelists, CNF puts the writing self not simply on display, but on trial: “From time to time, I tell a dingy little story [...]. When I do so, I like to think that I am trying to be honest, trying to show a little why I see what I see and how I see what I see. But of course I can’t. I can’t tell what I’m unwilling to say, what must not be said” (*On Living* 31). I’m quoting from *On Living and Dying in West Texas: A Postmodern Scrapbook* (1998)—Corder’s last effort at life-writing, published

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<sup>5</sup>Corder was a formative five years old in 1934, the year chosen for his own “nostalgic dreaming.” He, like my parents and their siblings, was weaned in the Great Depression and came of age in the Second World War. For further discussion of Corderian life-writing, see my essay, “Toward a Corderian Theory of Rhetoric.” See also my co-authored “Hunting Jim W. Corder” and the co-edited volume, *Selected Essays of Jim W. Corder: Pursuing the Personal in Scholarship, Teaching, and Writing*.

<sup>6</sup>Note that Corderian CNF is one among many viable ways of life-writing in an age of postmodernism. What I’m describing as its antithesis—call it the museum-style of life-writing—assumes that Truth (“the Truth,” with a capital T) is singular, stable, and knowable; that language is adequate to thought; that self-knowledge is a given; and that life is exemplary. Despite its naiveté, the museum-style continues to be produced in abundance. I should add that authenticity—a Corderian-existentialist aim of life-writing—avoids similar charges of naiveté by treating self-identity, not as a pre-given, hidden essence to be uncovered, but as an activity bound to a set of commitments expressive of an ethic of care. Responsiveness, responsibility, and answerability are the simultaneously social, ethical, and linguistic grounds of this model. In his book, *On Being Authentic*, Charles Guignon elaborates:

[O]ur identity-conferring identifications are drawn from, and are answerable to, the shared historical commitments and ideals that make up our communal lifeworld. What imparts authoritative force to our decisions and commitments is not the wholeheartedness of the commitment, important as that may be, but rather the authority of the cultural traditions and social practices that form the shared background of intelligibility for our beliefs, commitments, feelings and decisions. Seen from this point of view, becoming an authentic individual is not a matter of recoiling from society in order to find and express the inner self. What it involves is the ability to be a reflective individual who discerns what is genuinely worth pursuing within the social context in which he or she is situated. (155)

Guignon adds, “what determines personal identity on this view, then, is not the static self-sameness of a pre-given thing through time, but the continuous, ongoing, open-ended activity of living out a story over the course of time [...]. Seen from this standpoint, we are not just tellers of a story, nor are we something told. We are a telling” (155). In *Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor makes similar observations.

posthumously. It's a gloomy read at times, reflecting the author's terminal illness (as he wrote, he was dying of cancer) and an ego-deflation borne of depression. But such a passage, ironically, represents the author "trying to be honest" in confessing his refusal to confess all. Here, the partial truth of language comes to a head: It's not merely the cultural museum, but our own mechanisms of defense—of repressions, projections, and mis-remembering—that "slant" our storytelling.

"Freud was my father" (*On Living* 143), writes Corder: That's the opening sentence of "The Scrapbook that Holds the Truth at the End of the World," which is the last chapter of the last piece of CNF Corder managed to complete. In making this wry claim, Corder invites readers to interpret his storytelling through a psychoanalytic lens (which is how Corder himself studied the self and its texts). In Sigmund Freud's tripartite map of the psyche, the ego, though captain of consciousness, "is not even master in its own house" (Freud 353), since much of the id-driven psyche remains generally walled up behind defense mechanisms and repression. Being itself a "mere" complex or bundle of psychic energy arising out of (and differentiating itself from) the primal unconscious, the Freudian ego describes a mental/imaginative/linguistic construct whose defining feature is that it has repressed its imaginary/fictive origins. Yet our sense of selfhood comes to rest in its fictions, half-remembered, half-fantasized. Beneath the ego lie other complexes built out of the traumas of past experience; these pressure the ego-consciousness, expressing themselves as symptoms. Woe to the ego that cannot protect itself from the introjected voices, memories, fantasies, fears, and desires embedded within such complexes. Not only can we not know ourselves fully (given the inaccessibility of the unconscious *qua* unconscious), but we are divided against ourselves. The traumas and taboo aspects remain buried, albeit in shallow graves that raise a holy stink at the most inopportune moments, offering their insults to ego-consciousness. (Is it any wonder that naïve CNF remains deeply, albeit unconsciously, censored and repressed?)

Among the frail ego's fictions is an image of its own moral perfection, which Freud termed the ego-ideal: "In the move from primary narcissism to identification with significant others, the ego ideal is set up to 'keep watch' over the individual's behaviour and is used by the individual both as a model of perfection and as a self-censoring agency" (Laplanche and Pontalis 201). Out of this construct, the super-ego is born. As a self-observing component within the Freudian structure of the psyche, the super-ego/ego-ideal mediates between the subject's uncensored desires and its sanitized self-image.<sup>7</sup> But how shall we apply all this to Corderian life-writing?

In our lives and relationships we wear masks, often pretending—to ourselves, as to others—to be "more" or "better" than we are. We see this in the idealizing tendencies of naïve CNF, whose projections of heroic self-image smack of ego-inflation. Such writing aspires—or pretends, much like my patriotic, conscientious, God-fearing uncle—to "goodness," imagining itself worthy of approval. Its subjects are easily moralized, rendering self and others within stereotypes of hero or villain, wise man or fool, lover or adulterer, saint or thief, cop or con-artist. Though we wear masks in public, we must learn

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<sup>7</sup>In this paragraph and several scattered below, I make revisions to an essay previously published, "On Moral Criticism," pp. xiv–xv.



to peer behind these: So we are taught by Corderian practice. Though we do not tell all, we do not lie; not to others, not to ourselves.

Midway through the last chapter of his last book, Corder shifts from psychoanalysis to poststructuralism, turning the deconstructionist “death of the author” into a self-disabusing confession:

I understand that the personal must be in question, given, as they say, the play of the signifier, the indeterminacy of signification, the inaccessibility of Presence. I understand that *personal* derives from *person*, that *person* derives from *persona*, that *persona* means *mask*. I understand that there is no person, if by the word we mean a complete, unitary self confronting a solid, fixed reality, perceiving it directly and accurately, then providing a transcript of a living voice. I understand that personal writing is contaminated by mistaken claims of autonomous authorship. I understand that no writer writes alone, therefore never just personally; even if he or she is alone in the room, a crowd is there, advising, encouraging, hissing, cursing. (*On Living* 151–52)

“No writer writes alone”: Though the “crowd” consists of voices introjected within the divided self, it’s to his reader that Corder appeals for a witness. “Yes,” he adds, “let there be stories, histories, pictures that make truth by giving truth a place to be” (*On Living* 155). And the reader, we might note, is to meet him in that “place.” With this insight, we shift from a largely Freudian psychology of life-writing to an existentialist psychology of reader-response.

### Art, Empathy, and an “Ethic of Care”

Argument is emergence toward the other. That requires a readiness to testify to an identity that is always emerging, a willingness to dramatize one’s narrative in progress before the other; it calls for an untiring stretch toward the other, a reach toward enfolding the other. It is a risky revelation of the self [...].

—Jim W. Corder, “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love” (26)

In lived experience, intimacy demands face-to-face proximity, caring, and sharing. But there are limits to “the depth of psychic entry” achievable in life (Booth 87). Intimacy with another (from the Latin *intimus*, “inmost, innermost, most secret, most profound”) is something that we can approach, though never achieve in fullness. We can “be with,” but never *within*, the interior space of another’s mind. The lovers’ bedroom, the priest’s confessional booth, and the psychoanalyst’s couch are places of closeness and sharing. Beyond these, however, there’s one place “where the sharing of another’s *innermost* lifeworld—one that literalizes the *intimus* in intimacy—is [...] imaginable. And that ‘place’ is fiction” (Baumlin, “On Moral” xv).<sup>8</sup> Having made this claim for the modern

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<sup>8</sup>As David Lodge notes, it is within literature (modernist fiction especially) that “the essentially narrative character” (24) of consciousness is most fully realized and explored. In *Wings of the Dove* (1902), Henry James “had perfected a fictional method which allowed him to combine the eloquence of a literary, authorial [third-person] narrative voice with the intimacy and immediacy of the first-person phenomenon of consciousness” (Lodge 47). James Joyce went further in developing first-person “stream of consciousness,” his *Ulysses* (1922) “com[ing] as close to representing the phenomenon of consciousness as perhaps any writer has ever done in the history of literature” (Lodge 67). For applications to

novel, I wish now to extend it to contemporary CNF, which offers a second site of intimacy, authenticity, and sharable lifeworld.

Much has been written about the confluence of artistry and ethics in fiction. “The novelist’s task,” writes Martha Nussbaum, “is a moral task” at every level (163), given that “certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist” (5). As a genre, CNF has only recently joined in this critical discussion. Still, the CNF author is as much a “narrative artist” as the novelist and, on that basis, we can appropriate the “care ethic” of literature for CNF. As Nussbaum writes, “People care for the books they read, and they are changed by what they care for—both during the time of reading and in countless later ways more difficult to discern” (231). Much the same process recurs, I would argue, in CNF.

Engaging imaginatively in the author’s lifeworld, readers develop the empathy foundational to an ethic of care, as Nel Noddings describes it: “Apprehending the other’s reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, is the essential part of caring” (16). Indeed, “receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” (Noddings 2) are qualities fostered in fiction and CNF alike; in each case, these rest in an imaginative merging (of selves in fiction, of lifeworlds in CNF) that “narrative artistry” fashions between authors and readers. Marshall Gregory describes the “vicarious imagination” (211) as it works in fiction:

The vicarious imagination gives us the power to *identify*, to experience others’ feelings and ideas and experience—their entire mode of being—as if they were our own. Without reference to the vicarious imagination, we cannot explain how fictional representations get out of the text and *into* our heads [...]. Significantly, this temporary and imaginative merging of selves produces clarity rather than confusion. In literary experience we are given the gift of identification without the pathology of delusion. (211; emphasis in original)

What Gregory ascribes to fiction—the “temporary and imaginative merging of selves” in acts of reading—can be redescribed in CNF as a temporary and imaginative merging of lifeworlds.

Emerging, dramatizing, stretching, reaching: in the Corderian epigraph above, such actions as these describe the speaking/writing self as it opens its lifeworld to the other. Such an ethos aims at “enfolding the other” (Corder, “Argument” 26), at “apprehending the other’s reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible” (Noddings 16). Clearly, what Corder terms “rhetoric as love” covers much the same territory as Noddings’ care ethic.<sup>9</sup> Now, having brought writer and reader, self and other together in CNF, we circle back to a point raised earlier, when discussing the Freudian unconscious

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postmodernist texts, see Grzegorz Mariarczyk and Joanna Klara Teske’s *Explorations of Consciousness in Contemporary Fiction*.

<sup>9</sup>In the passage that follows, compare Noddings’ active verbs to Corder’s:

When I care, when I receive the other, [...] there is more than feeling; there is also a motivational shift. My motive energy flows toward the other [...]. I do not relinquish myself; I cannot excuse myself for what I do. But I allow my motive energy to be shared; I put it at service to the other. It is clear that my vulnerability is potentially increased when I care, for I can be hurt through the other as well as through myself. But my strength and my hope are also increased, for if I am weakened, this other, which is part of me, may remain strong and consistent. (Noddings 33)

and its mechanisms of defense. Given the partial truth of language, the author cannot, will not, must not tell all. How, then, might the CNF text's silences qualify the model of reading outlined above?

### Leaving Gaps

I suspect it was most likely a deadly situation if he was the only survivor, *which I can't know*, but it would explain why he never talked about it or the war in general.

—A son writing of his father

My uncle was not the only one with stories to tell. I remember sitting in a diner while family-vacationing in Florida, listening to my father talk to my fraternal twin. The year, I believe, was 1974. "I could write a book," I remember him saying. (He never did, though I wish he had.) I remember overhearing snippets of his story about Artie Shaw, to my ear the smoothest-toned clarinetist of the Big Band Era. They both served in the navy in World War II, my father as an airplane mechanic stationed in Hawaii, Shaw as a musician playing gigs throughout the Pacific theater with "the Band of the U.S. Navy Liberation Forces." (I confirmed that fact and got the band's name from a web search.) My twin brother was laughing, though I don't remember why: It was more than forty years ago, when I was in college. I do remember my father saying that Shaw was constantly drunk while they were together, an anecdote that I have not felt a need to confirm. What surprises me about this diner-conversation was that it took place at all, this being the only time that he spoke of war within my hearing.

It was from my older brother, who heard it from my father's sister, our aunt, that I learned a more poignant war story. I heard it many years later—decades, in fact, after my father's death. In preparing to write this paragraph, I emailed my brother, asking for details. Here's what he returned:

All I remember was Aunt Boots saying that he was in a plane that went down. One story was he was a passenger going somewhere, the other he was doing a shakedown flight. Don't know who else or how many others were also in the plane. The plane went down and apparently dad managed to get in the raft. No idea if he was alone or not. Four days after, he was rescued. I also heard it that he had a tin of hot dogs in his pocket. I suspect it was most likely a deadly situation if he was the only survivor, which I can't know, but it would explain why he never talked about it or the war in general.

So, there were two versions of our aunt's story, the "shakedown" version sounding slightly more heroic. But military heroism isn't the point: Survival is. When my brother first told it to me, the tin of hot dogs proved an important detail. On impulse, my father put the can in his pocket. As luck would have it, he lived off its contents while floating on a life raft in the Pacific, waiting for rescue.

Other salient details—Who else lived? Who died?—are missing. When my brother writes of what he "can't know," he is joining me in a Corderian project. I want to ask my aunt, but she, too, has passed. I do not blame my father for keeping the memories of war from his sons while making a sister his secret-sharer. This, I have come to believe, marks our generational difference: In experiencing global depression and war, *his*

generation's silence became collective and, in that respect, unexceptional. (I'll be curious to see how a global viral pandemic shapes generations today.)

My brother adds, "If I draw one thing from it all, it explains to me why he was a very brave person who was not afraid of much, especially when it came to boats. You survive something like that, it steers the rest of your life." I paused over these sentences, which offer a CNF summation of a father's lifeworld—and of an oldest son's admiration of that lifeworld. I don't believe that my brother is idealizing here or being sentimental, and his email has raised up in me a serious existential question: Can I understand my father without acknowledging the formative experience of a plane wreck at sea? It has been my assumption, postmodernist and Freud-inspired, that I do not "know" my father, and that my relationship with him (and, hence, with myself) remains unsettled, an internal work-in-progress.

But my view of him has changed, and now I'm tasked with filling in the gaps, searching for whatever external records survive pertaining to his wartime service. Still, I lament what is lost. Returning from war, my father entrusted his medals, citations, and other service documents and memorabilia to his sister; these are gone now, along with his sister, our aunt. *And I did not know these ever existed*, until my older brother told me about them. I wish I had known; I would have asked for them.

There are gaps—absences, blind spots, *lacunae*—in the narratives of contemporary CNF. But there's a qualitative difference between these and the self-censorings of a prior age's storytelling. For the postmodernist author, traces of what's absent are built into the text. In the following passage, Corder makes this explicit:

I have written as much to hide as to reveal, have written so that I might show the writing to others and not be required to show myself. There's more to me than meets the eye, and less [...]. A piece of writing can be revelatory [...]. It can also be a substitute for the unspeakable, a closure, not a revelation. (*Yonder* 54)

Again we note the effort at honesty: What separates Corderian CNF from naïve life-writing is that the author, himself undeceived, acknowledges without naming the secret shame or trauma lurking within his text. The author's invitation to readerly intimacy begins with an act of self-humility, of accepting that the reader-writer relationship must rest in a partial truth. For "each one of us," as I've written elsewhere, "will carry secrets to the grave: shyness, embarrassment, fear of judgment compel us to do so" ("On Moral" xiv).

If, as postmodernism tells us, we cannot speak or write the world and self in their fullness; if, as Freud observes, portions of the psyche remain inaccessible, repressed and unconscious; if, as history teaches, the records and archives are easily lost; and if, as experience persuades us, an individual's untold or misremembered stories perish with one's passing: If these things hold, then we must be content to work with whatever shards of truthfulness come into our hands. This is part of the noble failure of CNF in an age of postmodernism: Our mappings of personal narrative include *terra incognita*, where a portion of the page is left visibly blank.

I wish that my father had written his book. But, joined by my older brother, I'm the bearer of what's left of his story that can be recovered, interpreted, tested, and told.

## Composing the Corderian Scrapbook

Moral character is always in formation, never fixed. Every choice we make in life is both a reflection of the self we are and a creation of the self we are becoming.

—Marshall Gregory, “Ethical Criticism: What It Is and Why It Matters”  
(209)

But stories—histories, that is, and scrapbooks—can hold the blessed, ordinary particulars of creation. No truth waits otherwise.

—Jim W. Corder, *On Living and Dying in West Texas: A Postmodern Scrapbook* (19)

In an age of postmodernism, CNF can read like a scrapbook *bricolage*, a gathering-up of stories of people, places, and events half-remembered, half-imagined, each of necessity reconstructed. Though scattered throughout our mental-imaginative-archival scrapbooks, such fragments can be stitched together, made into a kind of whole by the narrative artistry of CNF. Needless to say, I take this metaphor from the title of Corder’s posthumous work, *On Living and Dying in West Texas: A Postmodern Scrapbook* (though I should confess that, as its editor, I imposed the title: in his own shaky handwriting, Corder named it, simply, “Scrapbook”). It’s in the book’s final paragraphs—the last story of the last chapter of Corder’s last book—that the title is explained. I quote these paragraphs in full, since they exemplify his way with CNF:

Grandma—my father’s mother—saved scraps. Then she made quilts. When I was a boy, I sometimes watched her, though I didn’t always understand what I was seeing. Grandma wasn’t a very good cook. She wasn’t cuddly. She was mean-tempered: the world didn’t always suit her well. She was illiterate. Her eyes were a little crossed, and her vision was poor, except up close. When she was fifty-eight, my Grandpa died. She had nothing. She lived for another twenty years, first with one of her children, then with another, in a rotation I never understood. She was lost. But she collected rags, scraps from other people’s sewing projects, pieces of worn-out shirts and whatever. Then, after a while, she made quilts. I remember watching her, but until just now I had not taken pains to notice the significance of one step in her method.

As she collected scraps, she sorted them by some standard I was never able to understand and tied them in little bundles. When more scraps accumulated, she would untie her bundles and go through the sorting process, adding the new scraps. In time, when enough scraps had accumulated, she made a quilt. I never saw her lay out all the scraps to consider them at once. She had no printed pattern or design. The design, I guess, was in her head. She began with a single scrap. She cut it to suit her purpose, then took another scrap and cut it. Within a day or so, then, she would sew the shapes together to make the first square of the quilt. Until just now, I had not paid sufficient time to the cutting. None of her scraps survived entire, though she wasted little. When she cut her scraps to make her shapes, she left something out. I’m glad I noticed or remembered that.



I guess we never keep our scraps entire. Her quilts were beautiful. After a while, each of her grandchildren came to own one. We enjoyed them. Mine was lovely, made to a design that no one else had ever seen before she made her quilt.

I think, too, that each of us has seen what no one else has ever seen. Each of us is the last of some tribe, the teller of the last story, the keeper of the last scrapbook, the last sewer of the last quilt. (*On Living* 158–59)

What can we take from Corderian practice, here in “Scrapbook” and in earlier samples of his life-writing?

Corderian CNF teaches us to revise, refine, and expand the stories that we tell. We’re taught to unmask ideologies, rooting out the deceptions that we’ve been taught and have taken as the Truth about self and world. By challenging the cultural museum with its regime language, we can begin the process of *approaching* truth (or truthfulness), knowing that any truth-claim remains tentative and subject to testing and revision.<sup>10</sup> We’re to root out the inauthentic from our personal narratives and collective histories. And what we take as knowledge will be placed under scrutiny: Our task is to write, not just of what we “know,” but of what we don’t know or need to learn.

In this last respect, Corderian CNF is corrective. Proceeding from an admission that we’ve mislearned, misremembered, and gotten things wrong, we turn to writing as a means to fashion a tentative knowledge, a self-in-process. We revisit old haunts and memories and histories in order to see or re-see them more clearly, authentically. This revisiting of haunts to fill in gaps and root out deceptions and half-truths turns CNF life-writing into research—a practice of autoethnography. As students of our personal/local/family/community/cultural histories, we spend time in attics and archives, surfing websites and recording interviews. The boundaries between personal and scholarly writing necessarily dissolve. We tell whatever truths we’ve uncovered and tested, but learn to tell them slant, allowing for some privacy even as we seek intimacy, leaving trails for the reader to follow. In balancing honesty, intimacy, and privacy, we practice an art of implication: In Corderian CNF, there’s work for the reader to do in “filling the gaps.”

There’s risk-taking in Corderian CNF, since narrative puts authors and their subjects on display. Concomitantly, we seek to accommodate our readers, building a commodious, welcoming text. For Corderian CNF aims at an intersubjectivity between self and other, using language “to open a space” for writer and reader to cohabit.<sup>11</sup> Within this space, lifeworld experience can be shared in an attitude of mutual, sympathetic understanding. Claiming health and community for CNF, I would describe its driving

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<sup>10</sup>In the chapter, “What Is Lost (III),” Corder writes, “Much, of course, remains in the personal archives that each of us carries around, filed, fingered, refiled, kept, whether verifiable or created, remembered or misremembered. Much, however, is gone and oftener than not irretrievable. Much is lost that I know is lost. Much is lost that I never knew. Much is lost that I went off and left. Much is lost that I chose not to see” (*On Living* 67).

<sup>11</sup>In “dramatiz[ing] one’s narrative in progress before the other,” the writer “is asking for an acknowledgment of his or her identity, is asking for a witness from the other” (Corder, “Argument” 26). Put more colloquially, one aims “to out oneself” in that space of language where self and other stand facing each other, equally vulnerable.



force as an ethic of care.<sup>12</sup> As the English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, writes in his autobiographical 1805 *Prelude*, “what we have loved, / Others will love, and we may teach them how” (13.445–46). This, I should add, is a love that avoids “mere” sentimentality. It is committed to the sensuous particulars of lived experience. It affirms the body’s role in life-writing, acknowledging that life is experienced within a gendered body that is situated in time and place. These coordinates are given; and while markers of gender, race, class, and culture can be turned into ideology, they can also be acknowledged as orientations of our lifeworld. The CNF style of writing is, indeed, “close to the body,” since the bodily sensorium is a ground of our authenticity, as much as memory and imagination.<sup>13</sup>

As Corder practiced it, CNF acknowledges the ethical co-presence of the other, “as we keep trying to enter their world or bring them into ours” (“Varieties” 2).<sup>14</sup> It refuses to preach or to assert values contrary to health and community. It refuses to muckrake, point fingers, or settle scores. Rejecting black-and-white depictions, it transcends conventional morality. Moral/spiritual dilemmas are rarely solved by CNF; rather, they are acknowledged as such. And each story must await its own right timing. Some will never be published. And that’s okay, since healing begins and, often, ends

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<sup>12</sup>I take health and community as the preeminent values of CNF life-writing and treat them as twin terms, mutually supportive and enabling. For the purposes of this present essay, I ground health in the practice of caring—of caring, that is, for ourselves as individuals and for all who share in our lifeworld. Health sustains freedom, which sows seeds of moral, spiritual, psychological, social, sexual, aesthetic, and intellectual growth. If these describe the aims of self-making, then community seeks to ensure these same aspirations for our fellows. *Self* and *other*, *individual* and *collective* conjoin in these twin terms. Identifying two necessary components of “the good life,” these belong to the revival of classical-Aristotelian eudaimonism within contemporary ethics. (See Somogy Varga’s *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal*.) They pertain as well to the Platonic *epimeleisthai sautou* or “care of the self,” as explored in Michel Foucault’s “Technologies of the Self.” (See also Foucault’s “Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom.”)

<sup>13</sup>In a previous discussion of Corderian ethos, I elaborate on Arthur Vogel’s incarnationist theory of rhetoric:

[A]rguably, all discourse is oriented toward (or proceeds from) the body; in this sense, [Corderian] ethos can be equated with the material, bodily presence “standing before” the texts that it speaks or writes. Articulating such a view, Vogel suggests that words are indeed “extensions of the body,” a sort of “meaning in matter, a location of presence”—literally an embodied presence. For meaning is in words, Vogel argues, “as we are in our bodies, and it is only because we are our bodies that we can ‘be’ our words—or, as it is usually put, mean what we say. We can stand behind our words because our presence overflows them and is more that they can contain, but we choose to stand behind them with our infinite presence because we are also in them” (92). (“Toward a Corderian Theory” 51)

<sup>14</sup>Indeed the task, as Corder writes in “Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love,” is for writer and reader “to see each other, to know each other, to be present to each other, to embrace each other” (23; emphasis in original). Corder published this essay (arguably his most influential) in 1985, before his own version of life-writing found a name in CNF. Though its focus rests in rhetorical argument, I’m appropriating the essay’s ethical-existentialist model for CNF: for both are grounded in narrative, and both share the same intimate, caring, and accommodating ethos.

with the act of writing.<sup>15</sup> In selecting the details of one's CNF artistry, health and community abide.<sup>16</sup>

As I've noted, the artistry of CNF aims to make "the real world" more real by sharpening our tools of perception, discrimination, interpretation, valuation, and response. I would add that CNF aims to create wonder in the author and reader alike: wonder in the beauty of life, in the nobility of suffering, in the complexity of experience, in the competing claims of justice and mercy, in the joys of friendship, in intimacy, in the mysteries of the body, in the depths of the psyche. We have a duty to explore the wounds that we sustain by virtue of having lived. And we owe a duty to our forebears in honoring them without idealizing or deprecating. It's with "a cold eye," freed from sentimentality, that we seek to recover their silences and correct their errors. The Irish modernist poet, William Butler Yeats, expresses this in the epitaph ending his poem, "Under Ben Bulbin" (92–94):

Cast a cold eye,  
On life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by!

Such an eye, as Yeats describes, removes blinders of prejudice, fear, anxiety, debts, and grudges. It is a clarity of sight enhanced by an attitude of caring and an inclination to forgive.




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<sup>15</sup>Of course writing yearns for an audience, *which authors themselves supply* in such private, confessional genres as journals and diaries. Still, the Corderian author must weigh what and when to publish. The final chapter of *On Living and Dying in West Texas* consists of a string of journal entries, the last of which—titled "Journal clipping, September 24, 1997" (153)—recounts his grandmother's quilting. In this "clipping," Corder writes:

I have almost invariably, after bland enough beginnings, started writing down hopes, fantasies, occasional near-truths that then I can't tolerate seeing again or bear to have someone else, by chance, read. I'm doing it again, and if I continue, I'll sooner or later have to destroy this journal, too. I comfort myself with great company for a moment, remembering that Dr. Johnson, late in his life, destroyed some of his own papers. (153)

By building this chapter out of diary scraps, Corder is playing with genre and narrative structure.

Unfortunately, he did not follow his own (or Johnson's) suggestion, having left many hundreds of pages of private entries for family members to find and read. I shall not tell what they found. I don't know why he left them. I can't say it changed my view of him, but the discovery of his private, unpublished papers led me to destroy my own juvenile efforts at journaling. Truth is messy.

<sup>16</sup>In the years since Corder's passing, publication in CNF has exploded, as has scholarly interest. Burgeoning new subfields have grown within psychology, ethics, and English studies (among other disciplines), each grounded in the practice and study of therapeutic nonfiction narrative. For work within memory and trauma studies, see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992). For a seminal and strongly influential work in medical narrative, see Arthur W. Frank's *Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, Ethics* (1994).

The individual experiences of survivors of cancer or of the Nazi Holocaust cannot be corralled into one rhetorical-narrative-therapeutic-ethical model. Some subjects preclude any possibility of forgiveness, accommodation, or reconciliation. Proponents of social justice cry out for a witness against poverty, prejudice, and political oppression; righteous indignation belongs to many such narratives. Not all nonfiction narrative falls within the artistry of CNF; not all CNF is Corderian in its ethos and urge toward intimacy. Where Corder serves, I recommend his CNF model. Yet I'm convinced that, were he alive, he'd be exploring this fuller range of writing-as-therapy.

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