Books

Review: "Portrait Inside My Head: Essays” & “To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction”

Two books by Phillip Lopate '64CC

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Essayist Phillip Lopate near the George Washington Bridge. Photo by Jennifer S. Altman / Contour by Getty Images

If there’s one thing writers love writing about, it’s how much they hate writing. The novelist Peter De Vries claimed to enjoy everything about being a writer except the paperwork. “A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people,” Thomas Mann wrote, presumably with some difficulty. “I hate writing. I love having written,” Dorothy Parker may or may not have written (one never knows with Parker). And Fran Lebowitz concluded that “not writing is probably the most exhausting profession I’ve ever encountered.”

Maybe it’s just the contrarian in him, but Phillip Lopate ’64CC appears to be that rarest of creatures — the writer who loves to write. Whatever the challenges of crafting language that rises to life’s occasions, he prefers them to almost any other human activity. “I plod through the hours of leisure,” he writes, “with a pretense of graceful participation which does not fool for a second those closest to me (my wife and daughter), and I wait impatiently for the next opportunity to sit at my desk and write. Anything. For it is only when writing that I begin to exist .... Intensely honest self-exposures come easily to me, the most provocative positions that clash with conventional morality are a breeze ... next to the difficulty of getting through daily domestic life.”

If that strikes you as a less-than-flattering admission for a writer to make, welcome to the world of honest self-exposures in which Phillip Lopate exists.

It won’t quite do to call Lopate the dean of American essayists — he himself reserves that title for Edward Hoagland. But Lopate has long been something like the president of the personal essay. If you’ve ever taken a course with a title like Creative Nonfiction or Expository Writing, you probably own a copy of his canonical anthology, *The Art of the Personal Essay*. If you’ve ever taught such a course, you probably refer to the book simply as “Lopate,” the way composition instructors say “Strunk and White.” And in addition to being the genre’s major champion, explicator, and pedagogue, he is one of its most accomplished practitioners. The “Also by Phillip Lopate” list at the front of his books will soon spill onto a second page, which must be a pleasing prospect for a writer who admits to measuring his achievement by the foot: “Sometimes as I roam about on a break from writing I tell myself, like a parent reassuring a child, that I am the author of a whole shelf of books; it was always my dream to take up a shelf in the library, and I’m almost at that point.”

Lopate has added two more spines to that shelf this year, reflecting his dual commitment to the practice and promotion of his art: *Portrait Inside My Head* is an

entertaining congeries of memoir and meditation; *To Show and To Tell* is a book of well-made essays about the well-made essay.

What makes Lopate's writing, and his writing about writing, distinctive is not so much a matter of style or substance alone as of a provocative tension between the two. Lopate doubts himself, hectors himself, contradicts himself, and lays himself bare, all in a voice as smooth and authoritative as a 747 pilot's. He has achieved a mastery of sentence and paragraph rhythm, of what Robert Frost called "the sound of sense," that allows his progress to seem linear even as he peregrinates; his conclusions to seem inevitable even as he surprises himself; and his most outré pronouncements to seem merely reasonable. In *Portrait Inside My Head*, he begins an essay about his older brother, the well-known WNYC radio host Leonard Lopate, with a dully predictable encomium: "He has, in my opinion, the best show on radio — the most informative, discerning, entertaining." But the admiring little brother isn't done: "The only aspect of his radio persona that dismays me is when he comes across as dripping with solicitude for some guest ... and I sense an insincerity in that momentary delay, that vocal catch (ending questions with 'isn't it?') that has become a signature tic in his delivery." And then there's this: "Regardless of the greater adulation my brother receives ... I continue to feel I hold an edge, based on the idea that my writings have at least a chance of enduring, while his improvised radio chatter disappears into the ether."

It's the sort of frankness that elicits a complicated response from the reader: first gratitude that it's interesting; then embarrassment at the knowledge that a writer of Lopate's stature isn't above such petty account keeping; then rueful recognition that few people of any stature are above it; then gratitude again for Lopate's pursuit of candor at all costs. The costs are real, too. In "On the Ethics of Writing About Others," from *To Show and To Tell*, he confesses that his work has permanently damaged at least one close relationship and imperiled many others. His recalls his mother forbidding him to write about her ever again. "I refused, saying that by this time she was a lively character whom I could render easily on the page, and I would make no guarantees. She said she would still come to my book party but would tell everyone I was her nephew, not her son."

Lopate isn't equally compelling on every page. He opens *Portrait Inside My Head* with "In Defense of the Miscellaneous Essay Collection," announcing both the book's magpie sensibility and his self-consciousness about it. Lopate could write a good essay on the contents of his glove compartment if he needed to, and that sort of

facility can be a trap. Some of his pieces feel decidedly more commissioned than others. Plunked down hopefully between “Why I Remain a Baseball Fan” and “On Changing One’s Mind About a Movie,” is a long survey of approaches to the cinematic adaptation of novels that reads like the foreword to a big book on the subject. Still, Lopate can do a lot with a little. As he notes in “Getting the South Wrong,” “Ever since Montaigne, lack of knowledge has often served as the starting point for personal essays.” He then proceeds to make his ignorance of the American South an asset in a series of subtle, insightful paragraphs about how the region has long held a fascination for Northerners, Jews, writers, and film buffs (he is all four). For such outsiders, the South is exotic in all the right ways: “It was as though anthropologists had found a tribe where the unrepressed continued to thrive, where they still yelled at the dinner table.”

Lopate also has a weakness for the odd cliché, which his obvious flair for figurative language makes all the more mystifying: “it shook me to my very core,” “barely scraping by,” “no cushion to tide them over” (that last one comes with a side of mixed metaphor). I point this out with some reluctance, half suspecting that if I were to comb through his corpus, I would find, and be humbled by, a masterful contrarian defense of clichés. If it doesn’t exist, maybe this review will irritate him into producing it — in which case he won’t be irritated for long, because he’ll be writing.

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