



## **Auster in? Auster out: Lifewriting as a Game?**

### *A novelist turns into an editor for the purposes of a unique experiment in lifewriting ...*

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#### **Abstract**

Life as the touchpoint between language and silence, the said and the unsaid. Take a famous writer who offers his readers to take part in an exercise in lifewriting. Based on life's ability to be condensed into an atom of experience, Paul Auster's collection of stories tackles the problem of preserving reality for readers outside this experience. For Wittgenstein the linguistic cradle shapes each person's life, for themselves and for others. The stories show that people spontaneously turn their lives into narratives, often relying on unspoken data. Here lies the life / experience distinction : experience becomes a metaphor making life understandable. Secondly, whatever is alive is humanized; conversely, time structures and the social context are constant props of reality. Surprisingly, acausal connections (e.g. coincidences) are a recurring feature in lifewriting — a way of transcending space and time. Wittgenstein's concept of *lebensform* (what is said about life initially and eventually forms your life itself) explains why the stories make sense. Lifewriting means discovering one's freedom, which ultimately raises the issue of the subject : the one who is free ? the one who has found oneself?

*Keywords:* Language, Experience, Self, Lebensform

#### **Résumé**

La vie au point de contact entre le langage et le non-dit. Quand un célèbre écrivain propose à ses lecteurs de participer à un exercice d'écriture de vie, il travaille sur

cette capacité qu'à la vie de se condenser en un atome d'expérience. Paul Auster réunit des récits où l'essentiel est de préserver la réalité pour ceux qui sont extérieurs à cette expérience. Pour Wittgenstein le langage donne forme à la vie de chacun. Ces histoires montrent que spontanément toute personne fait de sa vie un récit, incluant des données non formulées. La vie se distingue de l'expérience, qui sert de métaphore pour comprendre la vie. Tout ce qui vit est humanisé; inversement, les structures temporelles et le contexte social fonctionnent comme supports de la réalité. Les relations acausales (coïncidences etc.) sont un trait récurrent de l'écriture de vie comme pour transcender l'espace et le temps. Le concept wittgensteinien de *lebensform* (dire la vie commence et finit par donner forme à votre vie-même) explique comment ces histoires prennent un sens. Écrire sa vie c'est découvrir sa liberté ; d'où la question du sujet : celui qui est libre ? celui qui s'est trouvé ?

*Mots-clés:* Langage, expériences, le soi, Lebensform

From what it seems, life as such is often taken for granted, and tends to be conceptualized either as existence or biological processes [*le vivant*] but what is lost in this displacement is the essence of life. Secondly once life becomes a narrative, it acquires the values conveyed by language, but risks losing in the process the physical quality pertaining to the initial experience and to both the natural and the human environments. My intention is to take an interest in what lies at the borderline between language and silent reality, between the said and the unsaid in life.

For this, my proposal is to put into perspective plain testimonies devoid of literary intentions and the ethical growth they undergo when a professional writer is in charge; in other words, I propose to make the most of a unique editorial event that had echoes both in literature and in philosophy albeit initially a simple exercise in lifewriting.

In fact, the essential question here will be: what becomes of life when life becomes language? Of course, philosophers, especially in the Wittgensteinian and pragmatic traditions, will ask: how can life be anything other than language? Which is true, only what is forgotten in the assertion of this truth is that, for the living person, life is never language first – even if this position is wrong for the analyst.

Basing my analysis on his *True Tales of American Life*, I aim to discuss Paul Auster's lesson in lifewriting. I will start by retracing the origin and features of his collection of stories, his intentions, and specific position relatively to language, this

particular project involving choices between oral and written, literary and non-literary utterances. The primary impulse appears to be a reconsideration of experience, a phase in which ethics is prior to literature. Ultimately the book is based on life's paradoxical ability to be condensed into an atom of experience, an effect that in its turn can be multiplied by the art of expression. Yet the sense of reality is never lost: time structures, tradition, the community feeling, the unusual of everyday make up the actuality of each life's world – another characteristic of Auster's work.

It takes a theoretical model to try and understand how this works, a modelization I have borrowed from Wittgenstein. It enables us to describe how language supports one's life and to locate the effects of this support, how the self is related to its environment through a semantic construction, why one's existence is better perceived in terms of stratigraphic description than as a chain of events. With Wittgenstein, the linguistic cradle, a constant in *True Tales*, has the effect of 'forming' each person's life, in the sense that it gives it a shape.

Of course, this approach may result in questioning individual freedom. On the other hand, lifewriting is integral to a valuation of one's life; and the outcoming value is the person's freedom proper. So the entity we call a 'person' is best defined in terms of its narrative virtuality. Eventually, the quest for meaning appears to be part and parcel of a strategy of escaping from the confinement language imposes upon human beings.

## **I. Auster's Lesson in Lifewriting. The Project: its Structure and Characteristics**

### **I.1. The Genesis of Paul Auster's Project**

My argument in what follows is supported by a study of an uncommon, little known, but remarkably efficient work by Paul Auster; the nature of this 'by' will have to be clarified, for, at first sight, the texts were written by non-professional writers around Auster. In *True Tales of American Life* (2001), over a hundred and eighty people describe events that illuminated their lives, which each of them does in the form of a short story - sometimes less than a page; there, the past and the self are mutually reconstructive.

### I.1.a. Auster's Intentions, Design and Ways

Aged 52, just a few months before the millenium, Paul Auster was offered by Daniel Zwerdling, to host a weekly programme on U.S. National Public Radio [NPR], the opportunity to broadcast a short story every month; Siri's (Auster's wife) suggestion was to get listeners to write their own stories, which became the 'National Story Project'. The first sentence in Auster's introduction to the book is, 'I never intended to do this'.<sup>1</sup> Siri did, and Paul turned the idea into one of the most fruitful literary adventures so far this century, ending up in a collection titled *True Tales of American Life* (2001).

Auster says he wanted anecdotes that were true, short, unrestricted in terms of subject-matter, 'that defied our expectations about the world, [...] that revealed the mysterious and unknowable forces at work in our daily lives, in our family histories [...], true stories that sounded like fiction'.<sup>2</sup> Here we are, at last. From history to story, the path has been carved out.

In appearance, there is very little which could be considered 'Austerian' in this printed material edited by the author of *The New York Trilogy*. He says he has 'scrambled to choose [among] the best ones, and turn them into a twenty-minute segment to be aired on *Weekend All Things Considered*'; later, he adds, 'In an attempt to make some order out of this chaos of voices and contrasting styles, I have broken the stories into ten different categories'<sup>3</sup>, for instance: objects, families, strangers, love, death etc. Choosing, formatting, categorizing, this is not very far from literature. Auster himself says only a few pages 'resembl[e] anything that could qualify as 'literature'. It is something else, something raw and close to the bone.<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, through this avoidance of literary standards, Auster managed to produce a real, unintentional literary product. In that sense, he gets closer to what Virginia Woolf qualified as 'life writing', i.e. letters, written anecdotes, depositions, court proceedings etc.

Incidentally it may be worthwhile indicating what an anecdote is. In the common use of the word, it is virtually narrative, generally considered a mere trifle, unimportant even in its presentation, having nevertheless a rhetorical function since it is used to pepper discourse. Historically, scholars agree that the word first appeared in the title of Procopius of Caesarea's *Secret History* – *Anekdotia* were the 'unpublished' details he had collected of Justinian and Theodora's lives. Although anecdotes are generally qualified in French as '*in-signifiantes*' [insignificant], I consider that ethically, insofar as they enlighten a person's behaviour by referring to

a representative detail, they are closer to *ithos* than *pathos*, and allow one to seize multiplicity starting from singularity (through a process of induction).

### **I.1.b. Auster's Positioning relatively to Language and Writing : Ethics before Literature**

Later in his introduction, Auster slightly changes a quote by a veteran of the Vietnam War, saying about his team, 'We have never been perfect, but we are real'.<sup>5</sup> And this introduces us to the ethical dimension of the project, of which the reader is the other half: without the reader, the stories would be mere anecdotes.

Auster managed to capture in these stories the essence of Man's place in the universe, 'We all have inner lives (?) We all feel that we are part of the world and yet exiled from it. We all burn with the fires of our own existence. Words are needed to express what is in us'.<sup>6</sup> This precisely is the point where Paul Auster's project verges on ethics: how certain are we that we have inner lives?<sup>7</sup> Are the words we use connected to our inner, or outer, lives (in other words, is the community prior to the person)? Therefore, does the feeling of being both integrated and exiled result from the fact that Man does, or does not, have a mind? Metaphorically, if each one's existence is one's life-fire, is it not simultaneously the fire that consumes one's life – one's earthly journey being both consummation and consumption?

Let us step across the borderline and regard these narratives as merely written stuff; the average narrator will say, 'Language can't be first; what I say now has never been said or even thought; I've never told anyone, it was mute'.

Says Brian F. McGee, who worked on a supertanker, and once had a vision after reading an old newspaper article about the common regret not to have told someone dear, before their death, how much you love them, 'I forget most of the words I used, but I can still feel the letter's meaning. I remember expressing an overwhelming love for [my mother], something I had never allowed myself to do before' (p. 387). In that vision Brian has written a letter to his mother; chance has it that she was dying at that very moment. This silent filial love has never been explicitly told, and for Brian it is unsaid, it is 'not words', not language. Yet it is language (he remembers the 'meaning').

– Yes, it was mute, but language already (the unspoken is also part of language). The difference is that it did not become a spoken message, it became written; and in this process, it became an opportunity of epitomizing your life – that is why you were so keen on telling it. When you feel that something you lived can become a narrative, then it gives you the light to deeply understand/synthesize your life ('you

were born to live this event', so to speak). It means that, ethically, everyone is a potential writer. In rare cases, the writer has style, the written, and writing, experience is turned into art, into literature; the narrator manages to tell the story through categories of beauty and harmony, to be part of a prevalent cosmic order unseen by the public at large. This is where someone like Virginia Woolf stands.

## I.2. The Advocacy of Experience

### I.2.a. Life Condensed in an Atom of Experience

In addition, by better understanding any particular event, we, as readers, manage to get a full view of the meaning of the narrators' lives. What is analysis for the 'scriptors' turns into a synthesis for the readers. Note that very few of the numerous stories have 'life' in their titles<sup>8</sup>, evidence that the authors are unaware of the fact that their simple stories have a condensating capacity (in the Freudian sense of *Kondensation*). In dreams, the various thoughts are concentrated into smaller units, and linked by 'middle grounds' acting as compromises ensuring coherence and facilitating the unconscious, creative activity. Lacan likens this mechanism to metaphorization: condensation operates on language elements mainly, and the dream-pictures are kept for their signifying values. Although the *True Tales of American Life* are consciously written, the process is similar and explains how single events are able to summarize entire lives.

This is to be compared with what J. Shapiro says of Shakespearean biography, 'The strongest argument I can offer for abandoning conventional biographical approaches in favour of those that concentrate intensely on a slice of the life comes from the example of Shakespeare himself [...] in each of [his] biographical portraits, Shakespeare focuses on the most consequential moments in these lives.'<sup>9</sup> The quintessential value of this lifewriting is achieved through metaphorization.

In that sense, what Auster's collection best illustrates is the vision of life-defined-as-experience. Understandably, lifewriting aims at a non-literary universe; Auster says, 'If I had to define what these stories were, I would call them dispatches from the front lines of personal experience.'<sup>10</sup>

The philosopher John Dewey defined experience as the different ways of *having* the world; perceptions, words, ideas, all are means of 'experiencing' nature or reality. One usual mistake about Dewey's concept of experience is to relate it to the subject – whereas he regarded the subject as *subjected to* his / her experience, which imposes itself upon him / her. Experience could be said to be the synthesizing access to the life principle, which might explain why Dewey considers it an equivalent to



meaning. Hansjörg Hohr ventures so boldly as to create the term ‘enliving’ referring to one of the ways of experiencing the human environment.<sup>11</sup>

Mark Gover has a very strange story about how he enabled his friend Peter to discover his gift at thought-reading, and helped him, through exercises, to develop this preternatural power, until one night when Peter discovered undreamt-of abilities, and eventually told Mark, “‘We can’t be friends any more [...].” It was obvious then that there was something painful to Peter about his gift’ (p. 457). Years later, Mark concludes, ‘I continue to extract the meaning [of that night] in the shifting of my own life. Although I’ve gone on to become an academic, a trained skeptic, my training has not eroded the conviction that what I experienced that night was real’ (ibid.). The truth of experience, the view of reality gained from ‘enliving’, ranks above the narrator’s acquired reasoning and skepticism. In this case, life stands against education, belief against doubt: the paranormal gift (or pain) is not fiction.

### I. 3. From Experience to Reality

The problem then is that of the means of defining the relationship with reality. What are the constituents of the certainty that the narrated incidents have occurred in real life? Tradition, togetherness, time structures, everyday strangeness make up the actuality of where life happens, in a manner that is characteristic of Auster’s project. One of the distinctive features of lifewriting in the Auster collection is the spontaneous consideration of the connection to reality. We will see later that magic is often resorted to as a means of expressing the distance from concrete fact. In the preceding example, reality and aggression can be substituted for each other (commutative). Another story called ‘B’ (p. 19) verges on the same ground.

What is real, here again, is the human quality of the dog/child relationship (‘I was introduced to a dog ..., he had a strong personality, ... a strong name, a noble puppy, ...’). Conversely, what is totally strange is the rendering of the mysterious bond between the dog, more precisely the breed, and Suzanne, the narrator (‘a remarkable chemistry between us’, ‘a feeling I hadn’t felt since my school days with B[, ...] the same inexplicable kinship between the woman and [her] two dogs’: first a neighbour’s retriever, then a friend’s mother’s retrievers, finally an unknown retriever at the SPCA kennel [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals]. The latter would not follow the narrator until she called him ‘Ben’, without knowing why she had chosen that name ; of course when Suzanne arrived home with her new

dog, she found on her threshold a letter from her friend's mother explaining that her dog, Ben, had suddenly died.

In fully-fledged biographies, passages to the weird side of human experience would be exceptions and brought to the reader's attention as exceptional; here it is quite the opposite, such a passage becomes the matter of the whole story and is assumed to be normal. In addition, even though 'B' could not pass for Austerian, it has a quality in style and expression that would easily be identified as pertaining to any one of today's best-known novelists (add a few Wyoming idioms, it would sound like Annie Proulx). This means that once written, any life-event necessarily obtains a figurative quality, somehow portrayed with a poetic touch – making it a sort of poeticized prose.

Reality also assumes the form of time structures; here circularity prevails, there are loops in time: 'Blue skies' (p. 30) is about how a child lets his sister's favourite blue parakeet escape for ever into the Arizona sky. His remorse is immense. Forty years later, when the child has become a father, a neighbour talks to him about a blue parakeet, which, when this man was eight years old, 'just floated down and landed on [his] finger' (p. 30).

In terms of establishing reality, the social context is important ('In 1956, Phoenix was a city with boundless blue skies.'). And in the loops of time, the message is also a conviction that society is trustworthy: right at the beginning, Kathy, his sister, 'reassure[d him] that Perky would find a new home', and in the end it appears the 'two families had been connected long before we ever met'. The blue parakeet symbolizes this connection, which is summed up in the last words, addressed to Kathy, 'You were right! Perky lived!' In this utilitarian view, life means serving to connect, bringing humans together – in the words of John Dewey, 'creating togetherness'. The circularity of time is here to indicate the reality in which the experience is framed.<sup>12</sup>

One incredible testimony in that respect is 'A Family Christmas' (p. 64), in which Don re-tells a story his father had told him. In the 1920s, Don's family, like so many in the States during the Great Depression, was so poor that offering gifts for Christmas was impossible. Yet on Christmas morning, well-wrapped objects were piled up under the tree, everyone was given a 'present', which, once opened, appeared to be a castoff from the preceding year. While the family was asleep, Morris, the narrator's brother, had placed under the tree the gifts he had been collecting for months. Don's conclusion is, 'I remember this as one of the finest Christmases we ever had' (p. 65). The turn of the sentence shows how he identifies



with the older generations as though he personally had lived this marvellous event; only for him, it was limited to being a tale, to being words.

## II. Expression, Form and Sense

### II.1. Expression as Enhancer of the Atom Effect

Although the project has a great writer as an editor, lifewriting in *True Tales* clearly goes beyond literature. Yet, simultaneously, the choice of words branches off the story to unpredictable developments of meaning (humanizing, irrational, socially Darwinian). The second extraordinary fact, indeed, is that the narratives or testimonies in *True Tales of American Life* sound like, read like, they were Auster's himself.

The present article could not comprehend a full study of the characteristics of Auster's prose and style; suffice it to say that there is a general agreement on the following features: highly structured narrative forms as contrasted to a poetical style; questioning of language; play on names; avoidance of anthropomorphy as such, an equivalence between animal and human lives; family as a source of identity; relationship to fictionality (no agreement on reality); use of the chance factor; valuation of contingency.

Probably the best example of an Austerian quality is 'Pooh' (p. 13), after the name of a shepherd dog the narrator, Patricia, took in when its owners 'moved to a no-pets condo in Aspen, Colorado'. She adds, 'I was two people, as many wage-earning hippies were. One of me lived for free as [a] caretaker [...]. The other me lived in the [...] woods'. The very nice turn of phrase here is typically Austerian, and another example of analytic manner in each life-story writer; it ideally gets across the otherwise bewildering message that one can be one me and another me; note that in each case the first adjoining verb is *live* - in its narrative form 'lived'. This will be one of the features of life writing: whatever is living is humanized.

The story then develops both simply and unpredictably, creating in two pages a magical tale-like atmosphere. First the shepherd dog spent more and more time roaming the neighbourhood, until the day she whelped; this is described in *human* words, so to speak: 'home base ... pregnant ... had given birth ... a pretty good mom ... the dog family ... cuddled'. These phrases give a new dimension to the story – this is again common with Auster; *Timbuktu* (1999) springs to mind, a novel in which a dog is endowed with an inner life and an ability to reflect on his master's existence.

There would be no life writing if no problems arose, which here is that Pooh is obstinate in taking her puppies back to where she had given birth, under the

neighbour's caravan – hence the dog-pound for which Patricia is requested to pay a \$140 release fee to the sheriff. To avoid paying, she hides the dog and puppies in the forest by a river, where she visits them every night to feed them, until the day they disappear for ever.

Incidentally, the reader understands that unfortunately the puppies were eventually 'given for adoption', and wishes he had not read that a deputy sheriff proudly insisted on having shot a 'bitch that was guarding her pups so ferociously he couldn't get near them' (p. 15).

What the narrator retains is that 'It was one of the most magical times of my life' (p. 14): the complement of the superlative ('of my life') is enough to describe what life writing is all about: need she say more? Assuredly no, for 'of my life' acts as a kind of (stylistic) crowning achievement, set at a unique moment which, by playing a ('magical') trick on reality, manages to sum up in a nutshell a whole existence. The beauty of it all lies in its being both unbelievable and real.

For a second typically Austerian story, one can read 'The photo' (p. 56), in which Beverly, as she was about to go to sleep, saw a photo flutter down to the floor. She could not recognize anyone or anything in the picture and forgot about it. The next day, she met people at her neighbour's wedding, and discovered that one of the guests had grown up in her own house. So, Beverly invited Jane to visit the place where she had lived; chance had it that the lady caught sight of the photo that had fallen the night before, 'It's my father, my brother and me, she said' (p. 57).

What can such coincidences mean about our lives, and our understanding of them? In colloquial terms, this kind of event is qualified as *spooky* or slightly supernatural; it reveals a kind of fear of synchronicity, to quote Carl-G. Jung's concept – the idea that events can be connected by meaning (they are 'meaningful coincidences') even if they are not connected by any causal relationship. This indeed is a way of getting out of the space-time continuum, and in that sense, it is a source of anguish: intelligibility is lost. Experience shows that acknowledging acausal<sup>13</sup> relationships is a recurring feature of spontaneous non-literary life writing.

Probably the most Austerian tale is by Dana T. Payne. In 'A little Story about New York', she tells how one day she was told by a mugger, 'Give me all your money – or I'll cut you.' To which she simply answered, 'Get out of here now', and the knife-wielding man left right away. But this is not the most amazing point in the story; for years later, she still wonders what made him 'turn around and leave [...] It couldn't have been that my short, curly-headed [...] self had intimidated him. Was it his conscience? An angel?' (p. 205) As far as style is concerned, the complete sense of the so-called 'little story' is in these words that could be Auster's, 'I was living on the

Upper West Side of Manhattan, [...] between Columbus and Central Park. It was a transitional neighbourhood in those days [...] Poor people lived shoulder to shoulder with young professionals in an uneasy sort of peace' (p. 202). A struggle for peace, as it were, in some sort of socially Darwinian environment where carefully worded emotions are more efficient than weapons.

## II.2. Modelizing Life and Lives after Wittgenstein

Resorting to a theoretical modelization will shed light on the effect(s) of the linguistic support of one's life, i.e. the semantic construction of the self's relation to its environment; as a side-effect, adopting this model may entail the renunciation of a perception of one's existence as a chain of events, to which a stratigraphic description will be substituted.

The second reference in our reading of *True Tales* will be a confrontation with Wittgenstein's difficult concept of *lebensform*, to which these collected stories are one of the best ways of access. 'Difficult' is not the apt word; as French philosopher Sandra Laugier writes, 'To quote Cavell's phrase, *Philosophical Investigations* are "unapproachable" [...], they are by their definition "esoteric" not in their contents, but because they require of the reader a kind of understanding and seriousness that go far beyond simply gaining knowledge.'<sup>14</sup> Maybe part of the difficulty comes from the use of *form*, that should not be taken in its structural sense, but rather in the French sense of *forme* as *contenant* [container].<sup>15</sup>

Wittgenstein's description will help us understand, first, then theorize, how the linguistic cradle we have observed as a constant in the *True Tales* has the effect of 'forming' each person's life, forming in the sense that language (both in itself and in its extension) gives a shape, it contains, it supports each individual life.

Wittgenstein was not in favour of commenting endlessly upon concepts to the point of rendering abstruse what pertains to everyone's experience. For instance, the dissenting views on what Wittgenstein meant by 'form of life' do not make it a difficult concept – in fact, the French phrase '*pas facile à cerner*' [hard to pinpoint] would ideally apply here; hard, because of the excessive amount of surrounding impressions over the core of meaning. In terms of pure logic, no one apart from the individuals themselves could determine the characteristics of their '*lebensformen*', but this would imply stepping out of their own lives to describe them. That is why only outsiders, including observers, can find out the particular type(s) of 'form of life' their lives reflect. Apart from exceptional cases like those generated by Auster's and NPR's project.

One typical example of *lebensform* description is found in ‘South Dakota’. In the first ten lines the reader is acquainted with the theme of *live / life*: dwelling, earnings, existence, social organization. ‘I was a teenager living [...] in the suburbs of Atlanta.’ His grandparents in South Dakota ‘had set about to make a life farming. Not an easy living [...] Weather reigned supreme in these flat lands, and life revolved around it. Nearly every Sunday, the pastor in church made a reference to the weather, usually asking for it to change’ (p. 380). Such is the first constituent of his life-form.

The second constituent is already at work in the pastor’s office. ‘The idea [was impossible] to my grandfather that any daughter of his could marry a Catholic [...] my grandfather was able to make life unbearable for him’ (p. 381).

The two ‘parameters’ of life in and around that village are united when ‘after years of absorbing rain and snow and sun, nature changed [a fallow field] back to fertile land. And in breaking up the long-undisturbed black crust, the [...] plow churned up [...] human bones’ (p. 383). The corpse, alongside which ‘the birdlike bones’ of a fetus were lying, was that of a teenager who ‘didn’t fit in’, Diane Wellington. ‘Abortion had become legal and safe only a few years before her bones surfaced’ (ibid.) Sometimes what is omitted is more important than what is said: in the four pages of details (one of the longest stories in the book), the connection is never explicit, Diane dies of her particular *lebensform* – one that did not welcome having a baby with a Catholic partner. And the only protection Diane was allowed was the very harsh weather conditions that rendered some fields unsuitable for cultivation, but able to offer hiding places behind unusually tall weeds.

Commenting upon the *lebensform* idea, P. Steiner says, ‘the agreement in our uses of concepts is not one between opinions, but one in forms of life: “the indeterminacy, unpredictability of human behaviours are fundamental patterns of these forms.”’<sup>16</sup> He adds, ‘behaviours should not be understood as gestures only. Aims, organization, the placement of action into standardized ways of acting proper to social practices, institutions’ are also part of the forms of life.<sup>17</sup>

### II.3. Understanding the Making of Sense

Whether we like it or not, even though they were meant to be broadcast, so probably read aloud before being sent, all the stories in *True Tales of American Life* have become ‘written stuff’; they are what they are because they were language first.<sup>18</sup> What would they be if they had remained fact only? – They would make sense for the agent only, and this meaning would still come through language. This is where the

insights gained from Wittgenstein's contribution are needed. Commenting upon the meaning of pictures in *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Sabine Piaud writes,

The same picture may be living or dead, dumb or speaking according to whoever apprehends it is or is not acquainted to the life form in which it is inserted. [...] The phrase 'life-form' [*Lebensform*], with Wittgenstein, refers to the background datum upon which our language practices can be displayed, a datum whose sharing is one of the conditions ensuring a possible mutual understanding.<sup>19</sup>

What is said about pictures also applies to the life-narratives: this statement does nothing more than explain why these make sense. Although they do not concern (nor do they have anything in common with) my life, I need not strive to understand them. Maybe I would if they were set in Mongolian culture, or among Inuits, or in Gulag camps, but American culture being familiar to me, I am sensitive to the narratives.

Conversely, 'Greyhounding' (p. 201) would be more difficult to identify in Europe, where countries are so small that in less than one day you drive from East to West. This tale is about two young women who meet on a bus in 1937: Beth, the narrator, is 23 and has just divorced; Jean is heading home to become a teacher. 'Jean and I f[ou]nd each other [...] at a rest stop, of course' (p. 198). Fifty-minute pauses would indeed regularly let passengers and the driver have meals – it took days at that time to drive from Reno to Pennsylvania.

Details like 'There won't be anything left when this man Roosevelt gets through with [this country]', (p. 198) or 'I'd been in Reno for what was the usual reason at the time: a divorce' (p. 198).<sup>20</sup> could not be understood if the context were not clearly suggested. This is typically what *lebensform* is all about. 'We were probably both wearing seersucker dresses, cool and pre-rumpled, (slacks for women were years away)' (p.199). It is not only a matter of context but of displaying the channels through which mutual understanding occurs: here the 'dress code'. 'We read this new magazine *Time*, and Thomas Wolfe, the *real* Thomas Wolfe.' The narrator probably wants to discriminate the great Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938) from his homonym, the writer of *Bonfire of Vanities*. As for *Time*, it was created in 1923. 'We sang quietly "[Down by The] Old Mill Stream" and "Stardust"'; the first is a most popular song of immortal love (1910); the second by Hoagy Carmichael (1927) is about memories of an unhappy romance (Beth's?).

So the *lebensform* concept simply explains why the stories make sense, a sense that would be acceptable to the characters who lived it. It turns the subject into a listener

to (or reader of) others' lives. Attention to circumstances, context or someone's background makes one aware that *lebensform* as such is the exact opposite of an archetype: some lives can be 'true' in any context, in any place, in any period, those in Auster's collection cannot, they are individual types.

Regarding Man as primarily language, understanding as language the *lebensform* through which every man strives to express himself leads everyone to recognize they are torn between adjustment to the universality of language (language is not one man's property but Mankind's) and the simultaneous assertion of their individual types; this duality is again perceived in 'Greyhounding', 'this younger woman was remarkably well adjusted, whereas I felt scattered and flailing' (p. 200).

### III. Person, Agent and Self

#### III.1.a. Life Envisioned as a Vertically Integrated Datum

What did Stanley Cavell mean by the 'vertical aspect'<sup>21</sup> of Wittgenstein's *lebensform*? The idea was to define the term as not only the background or the social agreement(s) but also the biological pile of data: human natural history, natural reactions, physical strength, physical limitations, senses, human voice, etc.

'Greyhounding' has a complete paragraph on the characters' health when they eventually meet, aged over 80 and aware that it is for the last time in their lives: 'Between us we had had three attacks, one small stroke, three cataract surgeries, a thyroid deficiency, emphysema, arthritis in countless joints. We talked and laughed for two days straight' (p. 200). At first sight, the health check seems useless, but if it were missing, the two ladies would be reduced to purely mental shadows, literary puppets, as it were. Emphasized by the sharp contrast between the two word-lists ('attacks, strokes, surgeries, emphysema, arthritis' then – no transition – 'talked, laughed'), the integration of the entropic part of the datum is even more telling.

Another viewpoint on the same aspect of life writing is summarized in very simple terms by Donna M. Bronner, whose mother's sewing lessons were also language lessons, lessons in dignity, life-lessons: 'Along with my mother's lessons came her stories – about how her mother could cut a man's suit pattern from a newspaper, and how, during the Depression, her own dresses were fashioned from flour sacks. I heard about a childhood filled with loss, about war, day-to-day survival, and my own birth. These stories were as natural as breathing, and I inhaled them the same way I inhaled the air' (p. 431). Then Donna became a seamstress, and her mother's story mirrors into hers: 'While I sewed, I sang and [...] played with my



son. Instead of sewing, my son built *Lego* castles at my feet. As he grew, my stories were replaced by his reading from the latest *Star Trek* or Piers Anthony novel' ('Sewing Lessons', p. 433).

Is there a better transcription of what *lebensform* is all about? Here we find summed up in a nutshell, supported by the double lexical / semantic string of (a) storytelling and (b) learning life, such crucial facts as tradition (a body of knowledge handed down from generation to generation), social circumstances (poverty), physical trials (pain, starvation), human bondage (birth, death), and the reality of human evil (war). And what it all comes down to is the bare fact of breathing ('inhale'): the stories are equated to oxygen, they are the life support, the natural environment ('air'). Donna even discovers the permanence in storytelling, the invariants that remain basic whether your topic is *Star Trek* or the pains of previous generations.<sup>22</sup>

Bringing to light the prevalence of *lebensform* may result in questioning individual freedom. On the other hand, life writing is integral to a valuation of one's life, and the outcoming value is the person's freedom proper. If there is such a thing as the person or the self, it can be grasped in the way it is reflected in the complex nature of its narrative virtuality.

### III.1.b. The Status of the 'Subject'

Giorgio Agamben is well-known for his analysis of how form-of-life, rule-following and uses would intersect in the early Middle Ages, particularly how the Franciscan form-of-life emerged from substituting *usus* [habit] to the notion one has of possessing one's life. He found in monastic rules the very phrases *forma vivendi*, and *forma vitae*.<sup>23</sup> Already with Wittgenstein, the source of action is in one's assuming a given form of life, for this is what makes actions, actors, and their environment meaningful.

'Dead Man's Bluff' (p. 359) is about a child, but it is mainly about habits, and the part of freedom they withdraw from individuals: Joel, brought up in a card-playing family, 'cards remained a lifeline for [my father]' (p. 360); in his old days, no one knew what had become of his best partner. When Joel's father was buried, the family discovered the two partners would lie side by side in the cemetery. 'At least they can play cards', the mother said. 'I smiled, thinking about life's tricks. Or was it death's tricks?'

Note that a trick (whose etymology is in the French word, *tricher*) originally refers to a 'cheat'; in the end, life is the deceiver – you cannot trust life or death; in that

case, it is not the human behaviour that fails, it is life itself that fails to have a consistent meaning (hence part of our experience is unknown). In that case, the form of life is the only thing there is which can provide the missing meaning.

What is striking here is how one's life can be summed up in a single 'habit' – the reader does not even know what the man's occupation was, what his wife had to cope with for the rest of the week, what the child's expectations were. Secondly, the way the family's feelings are 'formatted' by the habit: smiling, laughing probably, at the funeral, is a substitute to crying, as if the unexpected encounter was the key event of the day. Now what is omitted here again is that the said habit pursued them until their death – symbolizing a form of ultimate determinism that questions the very idea of freedom.

Besides, 'Dead Man's Bluff' is a typical illustration of Wittgenstein's concept of life as 'tapestry': playing cards is the 'lifeline', the pattern that recurs every week, sometimes every day, organizing family and social life, and that ends up in the unpredictable closeness of the two friends for eternity. 'Tapestry' means recurring patterns, evenness and, at the same time, unpredictability; the motif is found passim, for instance, 'My life spun me farther and farther away from [the place where I grew up]' ('Parallel Lives', p. 420), as an echo of the stock phrase, 'No matter the weave of this life that you've spun.'

## III.2. Life Narratives vs Narratives of Life

### III.2.a. Values and Valuation

There can be no life writing without a valuation of the narrator's life, and the outcoming value is properly this person's freedom. 'Greyhounding' (p. 201) is about two young people who met on a bus in 1937: Beth, the narrator, was 23 and had just divorced; Jean was heading home to become a teacher. After the trip, they kept in touch '[f]or 62 years [and ...] wrote to each other once or twice a year, coast to coast'. They eventually 'met for an August weekend, two octogenarian widow ladies', one with a brilliant career, the other having failed in hers.

The story reaches a climax when the question is raised, 'If we were given the opportunity to live our lives over again – exactly as we had done [...] would we? Jean said yes. I said no.' They interpret this as meaning that 'you [Jean] liked your life and that you [Beth] don't give yourself credit for yours. [...] Then we parted [...] with love' (p. 201).

The final doubt substantiates the notion that life writing has to do with assessing the individual's relationship with the past: looking back on one's journey from birth

to the present moment sooner or later ends up in some form of valuation, and if the outcome matches with one's initial expectations, this valuation is of course positive – negative if one's past is a source of disappointment. This also shatters the notion of an undivided self, for, if one is disillusioned to the extent that their life is valued negatively, it means that one takes an external stance, dissociates oneself from one's life.

Being part and parcel of one's own existence and observing it from outside are two different views; ethically speaking, each is the basis of a distinctive axiology, i.e. an attempted answer to the question: what contributes to the intrinsic value of a state of affairs?<sup>24</sup> Here for instance, what one does, what one is, what one has done, how free one has been, etc. do not really make a difference. The intrinsic value thereof is the love the two characters feel for each other, and the chance they have, the chance everyone has, of being part of life as a system of biological processes ('we toasted the world') and being aware of it all.

### III.2.b. Summarizing the Words of Life

No doubt the quest for meaning is one way, maybe the only way, of escaping the prison bars of each person's *lebensform*. In that sense, language appears to be the escape from the confinement language imposes upon human beings.

At this point, it seems necessary to reconsider the dividing line between life narratives and narratives of life. Of course in Auster's collection we have more of the first type than the second; these short texts read like testimonies, whether they be meaningless or meaningful, intriguing, 'synchronic', or traumatic experiences – mainly writings about life. Yet the unconventional, unique import of the book is that each story does not only summarize a specific event but also might be understood as shortening a whole life, i.e. making useless a complete life-narrative (Freud's *Kondensation*); just like a chrysalis, or a DNA-profile may also be regarded as summing up a whole life.

'Parallel Lives' (p. 420) questions the dividing line between life narratives and narratives of life; it contains no extraordinary events, no embryos of tragedy, just simple lives, yet with a strange resonance that, complete or abridged, our lives might well be mere illusions. Timothy is a man who 'has felt a strong connection to [his] old house', one that his mother sold after she divorced when [he] was sixteen, a place to which 'for many years, he traveled back [...] in his dreams almost every night' (p. 420). The word *connect* occurs a second time, precisely when Timothy

returns to the site and sees the new owners, ‘We connected<sup>25</sup> somehow, as if we had known each other for a lifetime or more’ (p. 421).

‘I have always envied people who have a place they can call home’ (p. 420). The word ‘home’ is used again in a sentence that marks an incredible turn in the story: one night in Austin, Texas, as he was waiting in his flat for his wife to return, he heard a noise at the door: ‘Suddenly, the door opened, and a large chocolate Lab walked in, [and...] seemed to say, “I’m home.”’ (p. 421) On the dog tag, the name was Zoey and the address precisely Timothy’s address in Austin. Exactly one year later, while they were in Chicago, Tim and his wife visit the site of his former home, and are invited to go into the house by the new owner; they are greeted by a chocolate Labrador, whose name is Zoey – a dog this family had picked out as a puppy. In the children’s room, they find the names of the new owners’ children, Alexandra and Joey, written in letter blocks: the first is also Timothy’s sister’s name, the second is her son’s name, who was born on a date very close to Joey’s birth.

From chance to synchronicity, explanations are many, and this is not our subject. More interesting is that the story is based on a string of words – ‘envied, home, connection, life, destiny’ showing that a testimony to unseen forces ruling our lives may be felt to be all-important to the narrator; he may consider that the love of his wife, his niece and nephew’s happiness, his professional fulfilment matter insofar as they are integrated as secondary elements in the overall meaning given by this set of extraordinary circumstances. *Lebensform* is what gives meaning to one’s life.

Yet what Timothy fails to perceive is that the bars of the cage in which he feels confined are language: what he is unaware of is that he is caught in a network of words, of names; what is more, if one observes cautiously, they are written names: he is caught in the trap of writing. Zoey, ‘I’m home’, the address on the tag, the children’s names, are all written material – evidence of the fact that the man is submitted to the language of his own life-form.

### III.3. Souls and Selves

‘Toute l’âme résumée’, Mallarmé said, likening the pipe-smoker’s rings of smoke to the expression of the human soul, evidence that reducing the meaning of one life to its both shortest and richest expression has always been a staple human obsession – didn’t the potters of Athens endeavour to summarize Ulysses’s *ethos* in one single red-figure cup, *amphora* or *lekythos*?:

Toute l'âme résumée  
 Quand lente nous l'expirons  
 Dans plusieurs ronds de fumée [...]
 Ainsi le chœur des romances  
 À la lèvre vole-t-il  
 Exclus-en si tu commences  
 Le réel parce que vil  
 Le sens trop précis rature  
 Ta vague littérature.<sup>26</sup>

Narratives and romances go up in smoke, but if you do try, drop out of reality, forget about precision, let meaning live its own life! This is how life writing does not involve a writer and a reader only, but a critic too. For the self, as a 'living principle' (Derrida), is ubiquitous and polymorphous. Both Mallarmé's poem and Auster's *True Tales* are examples of this 'hybrid writing' reflecting the 'hybrid selves' Linda Anderson mentions in *Autobiography*.

Hybridity, doubts about the self, hence about the world, find their 'solution' in the event synthesizing the whole life: 'Whenever I have doubts about myself and the world, I remember what happened that day, and it helps', says the narrator of 'I'm Lee'<sup>27</sup>, a strange story about the narrator's nephew who died aged 12, but is believed to have communicated with his aunt after his death. Here, the conflict between belief and doubt is at a climax. Whether the reader joins Jodie Walters in her deep conviction that she actually met the young boy a few days after the funeral – the circumstances of this encounter are admittedly stupendous, we measure the force of belief as such, and the pain, the torment that doubt inflicts on human minds.

## Conclusion

The question then is to define what life writing is, and what it is all about. Our initial question was the following: what becomes of life when life becomes language? Now it appears it should have been: what becomes of life as life *is* language? All the writers in *True Tales* believe there is Man, there are minds, there are souls, but they may well be trying to find what there is apart from narratives, apart from words. That is why most of their stories, even unawares, try to define the essence of Man's place in the universe.

Each 'little story of mine' is, in fact, tending to the universal, which has to do with the ethical dimension of the project. First, there is an undeniable form of

anthropology underlying the texts: humanization is pervasive, for instance in the desire to integrate animals into the human race; as opposed to this, institutions are easily rejected from the human realm. So on the whole the issue of democracy is not really addressed, individuals are torn between a feeling of ‘togetherness’ and a sense that generations of citizens have fed a monster that devours them. This is very close to what Auster identifies as ‘the feeling of being both integrated and exiled’.

The main project of ethics is to enhance free will; in that respect, the status of the person is all-important, although the reader may legitimately feel that the characters are flailing at the air in their process of individualization. In Wittgensteinian terms, the individual freedom that is described here assumes a ‘form of life’ which one embraces because it makes sense. In fact the contradiction is between *lebensformen* as determining individual lives, and the choice of a *lebensform* because it can give meaning to one’s life.

This contradiction may explain why acknowledging acausal relationships is a recurring feature of spontaneous non-literary life writing. Unlike what happens in literary life writing, when the weird side has a part to play, it is the matter of the whole story. There is a strong liking for magic, especially the magic of everyday life, which is very often the ultimate protection against the offensive reality.

Practically all texts shift from history to story, from the general social environment to the particular event that is believed to be isolated from the circumstances. Reality is not reduced to the social context; time structures, especially circularity, are essential to the representation of reality. But most of the time the equation is between the experienced and the real.

Once written, any life-event necessarily obtains a figurative quality, that is why most narrative devices are encountered in the collection, from condensation, to metaphorization, slice-of-life method, disruption of initial balance (in V. Propp’s sense: no trouble, no tale), gradation and crown effects. The purpose is always to create intensity, to make the event appear as consequential, to deliver some synthesis in a pyramid-like manner.

It may be useful in this conclusion to mention Wittgenstein on ‘expression’, a key-concept insofar as the philosopher denied the reality of mind or inner life; for him, each agent behaves, or expresses something others interpret as the agent’s mental life. This is in keeping with the expressivity that has been observed in *True Tales*, sometimes becoming an ability to enter another writer’s style – what we named ‘Austerization’. This *mimesis* is connected to the mediaeval ‘authorization’, i.e. the need to quote an author as a guarantee that a theory is right.<sup>28</sup>



This indeed is what life writing is really about: embracing one's share of humanity, achieving one's freedom, accepting reality, expressing oneself. The common teaching of Auster and Wittgenstein is that the self never comes alone, since it is always accompanied by a matrix, be it the flesh of the uterus, the wood of the cradle, or later the words of the *lebensform*.

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## About the Author

Two simultaneous activities: teaching English language and literature; translating philosophical texts.

Research: Michel-Guy Gouverneur has worked 1) on establishing a connection between ethics and rhetorics (esp. how do virtues and figures relate); 2) on defining ambiguity (esp. how to keep it in translation); 3) on using translation difficulties as indicative of deep-seated logical inconsistencies (when statement A1 does not translate into A2, probably because, beneath the surface, a nexus of statements involves ill-associated concepts).

Functions: Taught and lectured in: U.K. (Sheffield Univ.), Algerian Republic, France Normandy, Vendée (postgrad. sections: English lang., international trade), Angers (Univ.: translation studies, comparative literature), Nantes (postgrad. sections: English lang., applied arts & design, electronics). Teacher in secondary classes, then post-High School sections; university lectures (translation theory, comparative literature). Research officer for four years in a French consulting firm specialized in cultural projects.

Academic: Ph.D. (*thèse*) in English-language philosophy (Paris-Sorbonne, Prof. J.-T. Desanti: John Dewey and pragmatic philosophy) ; Ph.D. (*thèse*) in Philosophy and Literature (Amiens UPJV, Prof. Sandra Laugier: G.E. Moore, Bloomsbury Circle).

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Apart from several major translations published (*L'EXPÉRIENCE ET LA NATURE*, traduction de *EXPERIENCE AND NATURE* de John DEWEY, L'Harmattan. Paris, 2014 ; and *PRINCIPIA ETHICA* by G.-E. MOORE, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1996), M.-G. Gouverneur has written on Balzac, Baudelaire, J. Dewey, Diderot, Ralph Ellison, Roger Fry, Mallarmé, G.-E. Moore, Wittgenstein, Virginia Woolf. No properly literary text published as yet.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> P. Auster, *True Tales of American Life* (London, Faber & Faber, 2001 [ff paperback: 2002]), p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xix

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. xx

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. xvi.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Following Wittgenstein, Jacques Bouveresse will question this certainty (*Le Mythe de l'Intériorité*).

<sup>8</sup> These appear pp. 129, 219, 420, not forgetting the book-title itself (*American Life*)

<sup>9</sup> James Shapiro, 'Unravelling Shakespeare's Life' (2015), p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> *True Tales*, op.cit., p. xx

<sup>11</sup> "[E]xperience" here is used as a super-ordinate term and concept referring to specifically human ways of having the world, there is a need for a new term [enliving] for this distinct mode of experience. It is inspired by Erlebnis, Erleben (Germany). Max van Manen (1997) translates the term as "lived experience". Hansjörg Hohr 'The concept of experience by John Dewey revisited: conceiving, feeling and "enliving"' (2013), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> We have here a hint of the Nietzschean idea of *Ewige Wiederkunft des Gleichen* / the Eternal Return [of the Same]. Following Patrick Wotling's ethical interpretation this idea could be summed up in a simple maxim: lead your life in such a manner that you may wish it to be eternally repeated.

<sup>13</sup> 'Not involving causation nor arising from a cause' (*Merriam-Webster Dict.*). Acausal episodes may be ascribed to chance. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/acausal>.

<sup>14</sup> Sandra Laugier, *Wittgenstein. Les sens de l'usage* (Paris, Vrin, 2009) p. 168.

<sup>15</sup> See CNRTL 'Contenant destiné à un contenu particulier [a container designed for a particular content]. a) MAR. *Forme de radoub* [NAVY. dry dock; *plate-forme*, platform]. B) Civ. *Engin, Couche épaisse de sable sur laquelle on établit le pavé des ponts, des routes, etc.* [a thick layer of sand on which the pavement of bridges, roads etc. is established]'

<sup>16</sup> P. Steiner, *Désaturer l'Esprit*, Paris, Questions Théoriques, coll. 'Saggio Casino', p. 15

<sup>17</sup> P. Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 167

<sup>18</sup> The adequacy of language and life-form in Wittgenstein's conception is clear from the following statement: 'It is what human beings *say* that is false and true; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life' (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 241).

<sup>19</sup> Sabine Plaud, 'Vie du langage, vie des images : une marque de continuité dans la philosophie de Ludwig Wittgenstein', in: *Philosophique*, 13 | 2010, 53-71. ['[U]ne seule et même image peut être vivante ou morte, muette ou parlante selon que celui qui l'apprehende est ou non familier de la forme de vie dans laquelle elle s'insère. Comme on le sait, l'expression de 'forme de vie' [*Lebensform*] renvoie, chez Wittgenstein, au 'donné' d'arrière-plan sur fond duquel nos pratiques linguistiques peuvent se déployer, donné dont le partage est notamment une condition de possibilité de la compréhension mutuelle.']

<sup>20</sup> 'In Nevada, including in Reno, a divorce is often filed in the form of a Joint Petition for Divorce when both parties agree to a divorce. A Joint Petition is the simplest way to file and obtain a divorce in Nevada when both parties agree to all terms of the divorce, including child custody, child support, visitation, and property division (if applicable) and when both parties agree to sign the divorce documents' (<https://nevadadivorce.org/reno-divorce/>). Reno was known as "the city of divorce". Hence the film *Reno* (1923, also known as *Law against Law*), an American silent melodrama written and directed by Rupert Hughes.

<sup>21</sup> S. Laugier, *op. cit.* (p. 171)

<sup>22</sup> Commenting upon Brandom's overall pragmatism, P. Steiner explains how perception, language, reasoning, are acquired from practice, from life-forms. ('[Pour ...] ce que Brandom appelle ailleurs un 'pragmatisme global' [...], l'action, la pratique, les pratiques et les formes de vie constituent les phénomènes fondamentaux à partir desquels des phénomènes cognitifs comme le raisonnement, la perception ou le langage sont acquis [...]' *op. cit.*, p. 136) The quotation from Donna M. Bronner is an 'exact replica' of this process.

<sup>23</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life' (2013).

<sup>24</sup> G.-E. Moore, Cambridge philosopher and author of *Principia Ethica* (1903).

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<sup>25</sup> Note that *connect* is by its etymology (Lat. *nexus, nectere*) associated to the weaving / tapestry theme.

<sup>26</sup> 'All the soul indrawn / When we slowly exhale it / In many rounds of smoke [...] So the choir of songs / Flies it to your lip / Exclude if you begin / The real as being base / Its too sharp sense will overcrawl / Your vague literature' (Stéphane Mallarmé, *Poems* Transl. Roger Fry, Norfolk (Ct) New Directions, 1951, p. 113). Fry will be forgiven of course, but one pun remains untranslated, probably because it is impossible to render it: *expirons, expirer* in French means both 'exhale' and ... 'die' .

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379

<sup>28</sup> Another form of this *mimesis* is found in the titles given to some tales: 'MS found in an Attic' (p. 58, allusion to *Manuscript found in Saragossa* by Potocki, or *Manuscript Found in a Bottle* by Edgar Allan Poe).