

Nick Mount: Blow by blow
Reconfiguring biography: A genre in motion

Volume two

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April 2014

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Introduction

Volume 2. Reconfiguring biography: A genre in motion

As stipulated at the beginning of Volume one I will argue in this thesis that an increased ethnobiographical life writing approach contributes to the contemporary construction of identity. Where, the extant qualities of a subject's lived experience, is the primary objective of biographical enquiry.

The creative component is a work of ethnobiographical nonfiction about South Australian studio glass artist, titled, *Nick Mount: Blow by blow*. It is comprised of a series of separate thematic narratives which act as entry points into more comprehensive, intimate and historical explorations of Mount's identity, and reveals Mount's contribution to Australian visual arts culture.

The exegesis, *Reconfiguring biography: A genre in motion* briefly charts the evolving genre of biographical life writing. It explores ways in which increased ethnobiographical methodologies; narrative nonfiction, and non linearity contribute to contemporary constructions of identity. I will look at ways in which an increased incorporation of reflexive practice and creative analytical processes, and key elements of narrative nonfiction including, immersion, scenes, stance, and point of view; and two features of non linearity, including narrative connection and achronological structures additionally enhance ethnobiographical life writing.

Biographer and academic, Ann Oakley, highlights a lack of inquiry into aspects of both form and genre: 'It is surprising that there are relatively few discussions in the literature about the methodological and ethical issues raised by 'doing' biography' (Oakley 2010:1). Oakley asserts, 'one reason for the low status of biographical life-writing may be the lack of

attention academics have paid to its rationale, ethics, and methodological tools and approaches.’ Furthermore, writes Oakley: ‘Most of the recent analytical interest in auto/biography has occurred outside social science and in relation to autobiography rather than biography’ (2010:12). Additionally, academic attention primarily revolves around discussions of content rather than form. Historian and teacher, Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia, writes, ‘Biographies are often a complex combination of life description, literary account, and historical analysis, whose potential and appeal reside precisely in this multifaceted nature...Historians seem to have paid little attention to the nuances of biographical narrative and have failed to consider the potential of its structural complexity’ (2007:65).

It is in part due to this lack of emphasis on biographical theorising that I aim to contribute to the growing body of knowledge pertaining to ways in which an ethnographic approach to biography enhances the construction of contemporary identity. The focus of the exegesis and creative component, herein, explores developments and subsequent reconfigurations of form within the evolving genre of biographical writing. It begins with a brief review of the genre’s development, followed by an exploration of the contemporary characteristics of ethnobiographical narratives—the term I use to describe contemporary biographical writing created through an appropriation of ethnography, narrative nonfiction, and achronological narrative structural elements.

New Models New Money, a discussion paper on establishing a foundation for artists, recognises public engagement with the arts is on the increase. Yet that research indicates the public views artists as making only modest contributions to the good of society. According to the report, ‘People recognise the value of the product, but not necessarily those who created it. In part, the explanation for this gap is the perception of artists as frivolous and risky entertainers, rather than as highly skilled and focussed creators and public sense-makers’ (2011:10). Challenging this misconception, Peter Shergold, Macquarie Group Foundation

Professor for the Centre for Social Impact argues, 'It is artists, in isolation or together, who are the creative turbine at the heart of the creation of cultural value.' (2011:3). Narratives about our encounters will challenge the misconception that artists, generally, are considered 'frivolous and risky entertainers' and confirm the artists place in society as 'highly skilled and focused creators and public sense makers.'

In the creative component I intend to reveal the many and varied ways in which Mount contributes to Australian artistic culture. This will be achieved through an inclusion of information and ethnographic observations of the artist in the act of making glass. In doing so, Mount is simultaneously engaged in constructing a private and public identity. I am of the belief that art does not exist free of its context. Writing about Mount's creative and artistic processes provides further context from which readers can view the artist. The ethnobiographical approach offers me an opportunity through which to observe and reflect upon various aspects of Mount's practice as it is taking place in real time.

I chose Mount as the artist/subject for enquiry for this thesis because first and foremost, Mount has a national and international reputation as an Australian visual arts practitioner. His work is physically and visually demanding. As a studio glass artist his artistic practice offered an ideal opportunity for ethnographic observation. The dynamic process of glass making is active and visual. It involves elements of fire and danger and subsequently provides scope for creative description and expression. The discernible physicality of glass leads to discussions of embodiment.

Author of *Seven Days in the Art World*, Sarah Thornton, writes 'as the art world is so diverse, opaque, and downright secretive, it is difficult to generalise about it and impossible to be truly comprehensive. What is more, access is rarely easy' (2009: xvii). This project required personal contact with Mount over a considerable time period and Mount consented

to the rare access to which Thornton refers. The rare opportunity to observe Mount actively engaged in his practice was integral to this project

Nick Mount: Blow by blow is comprised of a collection of short encounters which together create a larger narrative, not unlike the way Mount creates glass sculptures. He starts with the raw products which he turns into molten glass. He creates an eclectic collection of glass components of varying shapes, sizes, and colour. He fits one piece with another, all the while deciding what works, what doesn't, what can be excluded, and what is absolutely essential to give meaning and form to the overall work. What he does is a carefully considered intuitive process of design and structure, and a metaphor for what I do in the construction of ethnobiographical narratives.

Metaphorically speaking, Mount shares many of the contradictory characteristics and qualities inherent in the glass that has dominated his life for the past forty years. He shares the paradoxical and sometimes ambiguous idiosyncrasies of eccentricity, conventionality, transparency, opaqueness, luminosity, jadedness, fragility, strength, intimacy and inaccessibility, imbued, and clearly apparent in the glass in which he works.

Traditional biographies depend almost exclusively on sources and accounts of the recently deceased or long since dead. Needless to say, it is a markedly different process for biographers working with living subjects. Margaret Atwood uses the term 'negotiating with the dead' when discussing a writer's desire, 'to make the risky trip to the Underworld, to bring something or someone back from the dead' (2002:156). In a round table discussion on his own approach to biography, Russian biographer, Aleksei Varlamov, suggests a minimum period of fifty years after the protagonist's death is optimal. Varlamov writes, 'My task as author is to show as little of myself as possible and to place the camera as much as possible so that they will portray my protagonist from various angles. Hence the complication of writing about contemporaries or people who have recently died since ethical considerations

will then require the removal of many of these cameras' (Varlamov 2010). Obviously, conducting biographical research on deceased subjects disallows any opportunity for writer and biographical subject to connect in real time.

In an interview, Michael King, author of *Wrestling with the Angel: A life of Janet Frame*, (2000), explains how he negotiated at length with Janet Frame to write her biography. Frame eventually agreed, with certain provisos that continued to change throughout the five year process. King commented that, 'a biography of say, Janet Frame, published in the year 2000 would not be the same as one published in 2020 or 2050. It could not be. Even apart from the greater freedom to publish which inevitably follows the death of all protagonists, the questions asked and the themes selected by another biographer in another era would be different' (2001). King draws attention here to the distinct possibility that biographical accounts are rife with endless permutations.

Choosing to write ethnobiographical accounts of living contemporary subjects, as opposed to the deceased has its advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, subject availability provides greater potential for access, and researchers can personally explore the social, historical and cultural contexts more intimately. However, there is potential for manipulation on both the part of biographer and subject. Authorised biographers have the privilege of having the subject's permission to carry out their enquiries. But this position too can be fraught. Discussing the problematic nature of working with living subjects, biographer, Deirdre Bair, remarks: 'It is difficult to elicit biographical information from a living subject in ways that do not influence my interpretations in slanted ways or otherwise result in improper emphasis or direction in my writing. This, of course, is the major problem any biographer of a living subject confronts' (Walters 1984:36). It should be noted that the choice of a living subject was a major consideration in determining the methodological and

structural parameters of this project; an ethnobiographical approach is dependent upon a living subject.

I made it clear from the beginning of the project that I would provide the Mount's with a copy of the manuscript at the completion of the project. I did not show them excerpts during my research because I did not want their responses to influence the style, structure, or content. I did however explain what I was intending to do in broad terms. At the completion of my research I provided the Mount's with a copy to read primarily to make factual corrections. In future I would not proceed in this manner. I would check interview material during the process and not provide the manuscript to the subjects, more on this later.

Mount believes, and most artists agree, it is the work they create that is of primary importance in their pursuit for creative excellence. Consequently, this belief makes artists reticent about spending too much time focusing on anything that distracts them from the task at hand. The process of conducting enquiries, interviews, and observations necessary to construct a work of biographical life writing demands a considerable commitment of time and effort from the subject. I was mindful of this early in my research and decided Mount's day to day activities provided an ideal opportunity for encounters that would eventually form the basis of the larger narrative. It was not initially obvious which specific encounters would prove beneficial; however, with knowledge of Mount's schedule it was possible to establish a list of possibilities. My enquiries and observation over an eighteen month period provide a synopsis of his artistic process.

Biographical life writing narratives start as great deals of amorphous matter that needs to be moulded into shape. At the *Nonfiction Now Conference* in Melbourne in November 2012, Australian author, Helen Garner told the audience:

The way I look at it, the story doesn't exist as a story until a writer makes it. A story is not an object that's been dropped on the ground. You don't stroll past and see it lying there, pick it up, dust it off and put your name on it. What you stumble on is a mess of fragments. It's your task as a writer, indeed it's your duty, your sole function in the

universe to do the labour of shaping inchoate matter into something with a meaningful, pain relieving and aesthetically pleasing form.

The discovery of rock paintings, ancient scrolls, and buried stone tablets continue to provide testimony of past lives. Narrative carvings and hieroglyphic inscriptions on Egyptian tombs and temples proclaim the deeds of humans and the glorification of kings. The form most familiar to readers is defined as ‘the narrative of a lived life written by another’ (Petrie, 1981: 5).

In compiling a glossary of terms related to biography, autobiography and other forms of life writing, Donald Winslow notes, ‘there are those who, to this day, find the term ‘life writing’ unfamiliar (1995: IV). Life writing is the term used to describe autobiography, biography, memoir, diaries, letters, testimonies, auto ethnography, personal essays, photography, and more recently blogs and emails. I specifically use the term ‘biographical life writing’ to alert the reader that the exegesis and creative writing component is about an individual other than myself, remembering, that the hybrid nature of life writing renders it a genre with malleable boundaries.

Modern historiographer, Gary Ianziti, looks to the ancient Greek historian and biographer, Plutarch, to increase our understanding of writing biography:

There is a long-standing tradition of biography, which holds that the area of private life should provide the main focus, even when the subject happens to be a public figure...biography’s mission was to study the man, and to show what he was really like. Plutarch reasoned that such questions were more likely to be answered by looking at the small details of everyday life, rather than at large historical events. Plutarch thus showed more interest in how Julius Caesar tried to comb his hair over his bald patch, than in Caesar’s campaigns against the Gauls. The latter was the stuff of history; the former of biography. Caesar’s contrived hair-style betrayed his vanity the man’s inner make-up was revealed in a minor detail. (Ianziti 2003:7).

The scope of this project does not allow for an examination of the ethics in ‘doing’ biography, as suggested by Oakley. It is limited to discussions on the construction of ethnobiographical writing in relation to aspects within each of the research and writing practices of ethnography, narrative nonfiction, and nonlinearity. This includes an examination

firstly, of the ethnographic aspects of reflexivity and creative analytical processes or CAP; key narrative nonfiction practices and writing devices including, immersion, scenes, stance, and point of view; and non linear structural elements of narrative connection and achronological narrative. I work toward narrative connections, and an achronological narrative structure. This is undertaken, firstly, as a means to develop an understanding of their value and relevance to biographical life writing, and secondly, to inform my own practice. These methodologies have emerged as a consequence of an interdisciplinary enmeshment of theories shared between social science and literary studies.

Ethnography and narrative nonfiction intersect in various ways. One of particular importance to this project is the process of immersion, whereby the writer immerses him or herself in the lives of the subject, listening and engaging on a regular and intimate basis over an extended period of time. I agree with Tracy Kidder who writes: ‘I take it on faith that the truth lies in the events somewhere and that immersion in those real events will yield glimpses of that truth’ (1981).

Brenton Priestley writes, ‘A genre, amongst other things, is chiefly a set of narrative expectations—an audience derives pleasure or satisfaction from seeing these expectations fulfilled or subverted’ (2003). Accordingly, works of a particular genre must, firstly, fit into a prescribed criterion and, secondly, meet audience anticipation. However, a brief perusal of developments in the genre demonstrates there has been, and still remains, scope for further literary evolution.

An evolving genre

“I like biography far better than fiction myself: fiction is too free. In biography you have your little handful of facts, little bits of a puzzle, and you sit and think and fit ‘em together this way and that. And get up and throw ‘em down, and say damn, and go out for a walk. And it’s really soothing: and when done, gives an idea of finish to the writer that is very peaceful. Of course, it’s not really so finished as quite a rotten novel; it always has and always must have the incurable illogicality’s of life about it...Still, that’s where the fun comes in.”

Robert Louis Stephenson, 10 June, 1893 (France & St Clair 2004:253).

In *Biography: A Brief History*, Nigel Hamilton claims Victorian biographers ‘packed their biographical work with ‘useful’ information that had a moral purpose...deliberately or unconsciously using acts and sterling human examples to purvey a Victorian instructional and moral agenda.’ He added, ‘rarely, if ever, did such documentary biographers step over the boundaries of convention either in artistic or structural terms’ (2007:128). Victorian biographies were limited in both subject choice and form. ‘Victorian notions of biography as ‘objective’ ‘testimonials’ of facts pertaining to the public lives of great men represent the ‘quantitative’ end of the biographical spectrum,’ writes Oakley (2010:2).

According to James Walter, ‘Twentieth-century biography was shaped by the preoccupations of modernism. During the twentieth century biographers enthusiastically embraced Freudian psychoanalytic theories to systematically explain and interpret the lives of their subjects, and motive and meaning is systematically and thoroughly plumbed and brought to the surface. Ianziti writes, ‘Freudian psychology was potentially more closely aligned with biography’ (2003:3).

Bloomsbury writers in suburban London took on the Freudian mantle, placing their own indelible signature on the genre. Virginia Woolf’s semi biographical novel, *Orlando: A Biography* (1946), first published in 1928, swept away not only conventional chronology, and linear narrative, but more significantly, incorporated a blend of biography and fiction, and sent life writing in a new direction ultimately changing the expectations biographers and

readers have of both fiction and non-fiction. Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* published in 1918 illustrates a greater discriminatory observation, brevity of prose, and point of view than previous biographies. Credence is given to Woolf for releasing the genre from its traditional moorings from which it had sought safe harbour for far too long (France & St Clair 2004:322).

The modernist approach to biography took another unexpected turn once Poststructuralists in the 1960s and 1970s began theorising that texts were rife with a multiplicity of meanings. According to Jacques Derrida, 'Texts are decentred...no text is ever finished; meanings are never completed, either by the text running out, or by the determinations of a writer intent on fixing a single meaning 'into' the text' (Birch 1989:8). In *Constructing Identities* (1996), M. Michael refers to 'decentring' where, 'we can no longer assume that the self is some coherent, unitary, discrete entity. Rather, it is constituted through, and from, various linguistic recourses' (1996:11). Roland Barthes' concept of the 'death of the author' maintained meanings in texts came about from a dynamic process involving both author and reader (Barthes 1977:148). Poststructuralist theories about the 'unfixed' qualities of meaning in texts meant biography, and life writing *per se*, could no longer be regarded as presenting the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Biographical truth and meaning became as mercurial as the lives under investigation, and the desire to present a subject's identity as 'fixed' began to diminish. 'Instead of identifying and describing a unified "life-myth", a biographer would compile many stories about a subject, cross-cutting between many voices, implying that any construction of self was a matter of perspective and situation' (France & St Clair 2004:327).

In the 1970s and 1980s biographers began to recover the stories of women. The notion of 'feminist poetics' put forward by Terry Threadgold (1997), took a far more sociological, feminist, and culturally analytical stance. Threadgold writes, 'Individual identity

is formulated through discourses which include: divisions between public and private, economic and cultural, social and individual, everyday and institutional, politics and knowledge, and so on...which frame and constitute the sexed, classed and raced human subject's life history, and gives it both its narrative coherence and its discursive and narrative multiplicity' (1997:3). Threadgold's notion is particularly relevant to the underlying premises of my research and writing as it does away with limiting definition of identity construction. No matter what the subject's gender, an entwining feminist poetics allows for broader parameters in shaping life writing narratives.

Feminist sociologist and biographer, Liz Stanley, writes 'both biography and autobiography lay claim to facticity, yet both are by nature artful enterprises which select, shape, and produce a very unnatural product, for no life is lived quite so much under a single spotlight as the conventional form of written auto/biographies suggests' (Stanley 1992:4).

Following a conference on modern biography in 1985, Stanley took on the 'crème de la crème' of British professional and academic biographers,' as she calls them. They insisted, as much as the genre had changed, the fundamental task of the biographer continued to remain the same. In *The auto/biographical I* (1992), Stanley's seminal text on developments in the genre, she argues against several of the prevailing characteristics of biographical writing professed at the time. Stanley is critical of the lack of enquiry around the construction or reconstruction of peoples lived experience in texts, she writes:

Modern biography is founded upon a realist fallacy. The modern novel and modern biography had their origins in the same period of high Victorian positivism and both are fed from a staunchly realistic stance...The realist enterprise of reconstruction and expertise in biography depends on not only a foundationalist view of biographical research, but also a correspondence theory of the relationship between the written product of biographical research and the lives it investigates—that the text is precisely referential of the person. Similarly, it proposes that there is a coherent, essentially unchanging and unitary self which can be referentially captured by its methods. (Stanley 1992:8)

Stanley does not agree with the view that biographers must ‘follow the linear trajectory of their subject’s development by reconstructing, in as much detail as possible, their life from cradle to grave, by locating their particular work and achievements and their character within the mass of detail’. Furthermore, and more importantly, she argues against the practice whereby, ‘the central task of biography was the ‘reconstruction’ on paper of the essential fundamental person’ (1992:7). Stanley argues that the ‘reconstruction’ of a biographical subject is an intellectual non-starter—proposing that we can somehow recover the past, understand it as it was experienced and understood by the people who actually lived it. She suggests another approach would be to ask different questions of biography. Namely, the past from whose view point and what would be the effect of working from a contrary viewpoint (1992:7). As the narrator In *Nick Mount: Blow by blow* I take this line of enquiry further and examine the *present* from my point of view.

In the early 1990s Stanley argued biography was simply one of many possible ‘versions.’ It is a premise now commonly accepted among writers and readers of the genre. As such, there can be no single authoritative version, and biographers can no longer claim absolute authority on their chosen subject. This is not to say that biographers have no power, but as will become evident, the position of power once held by the biographer is to varying degrees being relinquished. Stanley writes; ‘Locating the resulting biography as one competing version among others enables readers to make their own evaluation of whether, and to what extent they find the result plausible or acceptable. To encourage this, biographers should not only make available to readers as much of the evidence, and of different kinds, that they work from as possible, but also an account of what facts, opinions and interpretations they find preferable and why’ (1992:10). In *Narrative Inquiry: Multiple Lenses, Approaches, Voices*, sociologist, Susan Chase, acknowledges that the explosion of

interest in women's stories was accompanied by feminist challenges to conventional assumptions about research relationships and research methods (2005:655).

Although most biographies focus first and foremost on one particular individual, Stanley suggests a shift away from a 'spotlight' approach, and encourages biographers to give greater attention to the friendship patterns, social networks, and cultural environments of their subjects. She writes, 'no person is an island complete of itself; and an approach to biography informed by feminist sociology and cultural politics should recognise that social networks are a crucial means of enabling us to get a purchase on other lives' (1992:10). I have included accounts about the glass community to facilitate this non spotlight approach.

Stanley writes, 'In feminist and cultural political terms, ideas are produced within a particular social milieu...the social networks within which the biographical subject located their activities and work need to be closely examined rather than being divorced from the social contexts within which they lived' (1999:8). Christina Lonardi makes the following comment on the construction of identity in biography:

The biography does not exist per se, as the simple product of accumulated events organised in the memory, but it has the function of connecting individuals to their culture of belonging, positioning them in accordance with a social system consisting of roles, values, beliefs and ideologies...narratives typically require the interweaving of identities, and, thus, the support of others within the social sphere of interaction. In these various senses, then, the telling of the story is not so much the act of an independent individual as the result of a mutually coordinated and supportive relationship...identity is an image of ourselves that we produce internally and that is consolidated through interaction and relations with others (2011:47).

Australian authors of the 1980s and 1990s began to reconfigure life writing through their choices in research methodology and writing practices. Brian Matthews' *Louisa* (1987), based on the life of Louisa Lawson, and Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* (1990) deviate from the time honoured constraints of conventional chronological life writing. These writers created hybrid 'factions' in the construction of expansive narratives about the lives of their subjects, where the boundaries between fact and fiction are not always clearly evident. I should stress

that the biographical life writing component of my thesis is a work of narrative nonfiction and most definitely not a hybrid work of fiction.

Modjeska's *Stravinsky's Lunch*, (1999), the double biography of Adelaide artist and writer, Stella Bowen, and Sydney artist, Grace Cossington Smith, is another example where biography veers from a traditional linear form. Modjeska's conversational style and reflexivity effectively picks up the threads of these women's life experiences and weaves them into biographical narratives. Her understated writing style, meticulous attention to detail, pursuit of intimacy, light creative touch, and faithfulness to accuracy, influences my own approach to the genre. In *The White: last days in the arctic journeys of Scott and Mawson 1911-1913*, (1999), Australian writer Adrian Caesar writes in the first person, appropriating fictive devices to ask questions previous biographers and writers neglected or were too reticent to tackle. Needless to say at time of publication Caesar was confronted with a barrage of criticism and forced to explain to which genre the book belonged. Today it is marketed as a nonfiction novel: merging boundaries between non-fiction and fiction (George 2002).

Australian film maker and writer, Meg Stewart's, biography, *Margaret Olley: far from a still life*, (2005) provides a chronological account of the life and work of the late iconic Australian painter. The form, as such, doesn't stray far from conventional biography. However, Stewart has layered the narrative with lengthy direct quotes and reminiscences from Olley prior to her death. Other biographers may have summarised Olley's conversations, but Stewart incorporates large chunks into the narrative at regular intervals. Thus, Stewart provides a deeper sense of intimacy and engagement by reducing her presence while magnifying Olley's.

Australian singer and song writer, Paul Kelly's, memoir *How to make gravy* (2010) avoids a chronological womb-to-tomb narrative structure. Instead, Kelly weaves in a

multiplicity of texts, some connected, some obscure vignettes, snippets, and personal musings to construct a narrative portrait of himself. Kelly touches on the creative processes in a brief explanation of how he brought the narrative to life:

I went back to my show notes, put them next to the song lyrics and let my mind brew. I wanted to find a key I could turn, to feel a little click that would set me writing in a new way. Over time I found a series of keys, some to big rooms, some to little rooms, and some to dark cupboards. Many days I was locked out of the house altogether. Before too long a mongrel beast emerged...There were lists, letters, quotes, confessions, essays and road stories. Could I get them all to fit? Could I make the architecture sing? (2010:3)

Kelly's sprawling narrative mirrors the structure of his now legendary 'A to Z' concert performances across Australia during the months prior to publication. He uses his song lyrics as 'launching pads' to an entire gamut of related but disconnected narratives about his life. Kelly's memoir is another illustration that life writing is no longer strangled by the literary ligatures inherent in the history of the genre and is open to a multiplicity of indeterminate aesthetics.

One of the dilemmas for working biographers, according to late biographer and academic, Leon Edel, is that of 'imposing order, bringing logic and shape to the record of something that is mercurial and as flowing, and compact of temperament and emotion, as the human spirit itself' (Walter 2004:323). As a consequence various influences have been brought to bear on the construction of biography.

The Social Constructionism that arose in the 1980s and gained momentum in the 1990s continues to fit comfortably with current theories of the construction of identity in contemporary culture. T. Soderquist writes, 'Constructionism refers to the movement within human sciences which see knowledge as a result of social processes and which points to the linguistic interactional and socially shared character of knowledge' (Soderquist 1991:142). This is contrary to theories of essentialism whereby identity is inherent and biologically determined. Constructionism posits identity as contingent on social and historical

processes—the very same processes that underpin biography. Soderquist is adamant, ‘biography is not an innocent activity. Biographical accounts are not objective...writing biography is also a constructive enterprise.’

Contemporary writers incorporate modes of reflexivity to diminish authority and power. They disclose more about themselves and increasingly write about the process by which they formulate interpretations and give meaning to texts. Soderquist suggests ‘counteracting biography’s non-intentional contribution to the reification of an objective reality would be to enhance its reflexivity; where reflexivity, in the domain of biography, amounts to the introduction of elements of the biographer’s autobiography into the biography’ (1991:155).

Matthew Ricketson writes; ‘The first choice to be made by practitioners who write in a narrative style is whether they make claim to represent events and people as they are or draw attention to the impossibility or, at least, the difficulty of doing this’ (2014:130). He refers to the two main approaches proposed by David Eason:

The first he terms realist, the second modernist. The first approach claims to represent reality as it is, the second draws attention to the inherent difficulty of this task, and makes it clear to the reader that the meaning of events is constructed by both journalist and reader. Eason argues Talese, Wolfe and Capote take the realist approach while Didion, Mailer and Thompson take the modernist approach. The former group acknowledges that ‘reality, though elusive, nonetheless waits to be discovered’, which they achieve by immersing themselves in their subjects’ worlds and writing in a narrative style about what they find. The second group believes image and reality in the world are so entwined as to entangle common understandings. The modernists write in a narrative style that calls ‘attention to storytelling as a cultural practice for making a common world’...where realists describe their firsthand observation as a professional act that poses ‘only manageable ethical problems’, modernists explicitly examine such assumptions.

(2014:131)

Ricketson questions Eason’s’ binary perspective. He writes: ‘Conceiving of narrative nonfiction existing along a continuum rather than a binary framework, it can be seen that realist texts sitting near one end of the continuum ask for greater trust from readers and have fewer ways of signalling that they offer one version of events rather than an inviolable truth.

At the other end, modernist texts make clear the limits of representation, but this is a first step, not the final word' (2014:133). He suggests 'the nature and aims of the narrative nonfiction affects the choice of voice.' (2014:151). Additionally writers, 'need to be open to their own subjective response to the material they are exploring and think about how much their presence affects the events they write about...and in what ways their subjective response is necessary to tell their true story, (2014:152). My narratorial presence leans more toward the realist end of the realist-modernist narrative nonfiction spectrum to which Ricketson refers.

Nick Mount: Blow by blow is an account of Mount's artistic practice. However, it is more than that. It reveals the physical, emotional, financial, and creative investment, both personal and professional, required of a visual arts practitioner. In doing so, it illustrates not only Mount's, contribution to Australian culture, but visual artists' contribution in general. This makes Mount's story worth telling.

In *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, Helen Garner writes about the killing of Joe Cinque with copious self reflexive swathes of information about the processes by which she sought to understand the complexities of what she was investigating and writing about. In doing so, makes her position overtly known. She writes:

I read miserably, wildly, at random. I bought personal memoirs by undistinguished, wounded people whose children had been murdered and who, like Maria Cinque, were asking the universe, "How am I supposed to go on?" I ploughed through books on depression and mental illness and suicide...I devoured everything I could find by Gitta Sereny. I read Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. I wept over the quiet reasoning of those who maintained that the purpose of criminal proceedings is not 'to still the desire for revenge in the victim's hearts,' but to repair the rent in the social fabric. (2004:280)

Soderquist encouraged reflexivity in biography in 1991 at a time when it was still regarded as a transgression, and apart from having their name on the cover, many biographers remained conspicuously absent from the narrative. The question today is not whether the biographer should be in the text, but where and how they make their presence felt. Oakley identified what now appears to be patently obvious, 'Biographers, in particular, are agents

who turn encyclopaedias of material into readable accounts, so their subjectivity must contribute to the product' (2010:2).

James Walter refers to the prevailing indeterminacy and tendentiousness increasingly evident in biography. 'Indeterminacy,' writes Walter, 'has long been recognised as the characteristic feature of modern biography, and the fact that biographical truth can never finally be settled, that biography is always tendentious, has inflected every other methodological strategy' (France 2004:322). In other words, the very nature of biographical life writing's ambiguity makes it impossible to consider an individual's narrative as anything other than inconclusive reconstructions, and never free from the writer's point of view.

Stanley writes, 'Life presents us with complex views of the self: with competing estimations of character, motive, behaviour, and intention. Biography should recognise this, document and present these versions concerning its subjects rather than try to eradicate them through searching for a seamless "truth" about subjects/or events in their lives' (1992:11). It's sage advice for contemporary biographical writing.

In the following chapters I examine how a developing ethnobiographical approach appropriated from a combination of ethnography, narrative nonfiction and nonlinearity contributes to the construction of contemporary identity.

Ethnographic reflexivity in biography

'The biographer of a contemporary can learn a great deal if she/he becomes a trained observer, listening to and reading what is said, alert for such telling behavioural signals as idiosyncrasies of bearing, gesture, speech, expressiveness, responses to stress, and so on. From the accretion of such isolated observations, an overall impression of one's subject's characteristics and of how they hang together may well be generated. The ability to transmit this in narrative will bring the subject to life in biography.'

(Walters 1984:61)

Biographical research is qualitative and as such, linked as much to literature as the social sciences. Current biographical writing exemplifies a high degree of transparency not previously seen in traditional biography. A desire for increased transparency of the research process is generating an increased appropriation of ethnographic practices and facilitating the evolution of the genre. Soderquist draws attention to shifts in the genre suggesting 'the *process* by which a particular personality intersects with a particular subject matter has rarely been shown, and the intersection itself almost never regarded as containing material of potential worth...the specific value of writing biography lies precisely in its ability to show the embodied character of knowledge construction.' Consequently, 'reflexivity in biography writing should also demonstrate the embodied character of the construction' (Soderquist 1991:156).

The disciplines of anthropology and social science have long held ethnography to be the cornerstone research methodology of investigating human behaviour. In *The Navigators of the Contemporary: why ethnography matters*, David Westbrook, positions traditional ethnography as having, 'described the worldviews of foreign cultures.' He adds that 'once there were no more islands over the horizon of contemporary consciousness, the geographical and social context of ethnography, and so culture of ethnography changed' (2008:9). Ethnographic practice once regarded the subject objectively as 'other', 'foreign' and, 'alien' but this is no longer the case.

Charlotte Aull Davies describes ethnography as ‘a research process based on fieldwork using a variety of mainly (but not exclusively) qualitative research techniques including engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time’ (2008:5). The limitations of this thesis do not allow for further discussion on how ethnography has morphed into its current methodology. However, I acknowledge and agree with Westbrook that, ‘the traditional ethnographic encounter turns out to be oddly suited for inquiry into aspects of the contemporary’ (2004:41).

Ethnography is both subjective and objective. ‘Not surprisingly, the biographical method is tied to theoretical approaches emphasising the importance of subjectivity,’ writes Oakley (2010:2). The creative component of this thesis incorporates reflexive practices into, firstly, accumulating information and, secondly, writing up the narratives. All the while I heed David Westbrook’s advice that, ‘given both the intellectual dangers inherent in reflexivity and the centrality of the author, considerable discipline is required in order to prevent egoism, or merely self-indulgence from overwhelming the expression of an ethnography for present situations’ (2008:112).

Aull Davies suggests that, ‘reflexivity, broadly defined, means a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference. In the context of social research, reflexivity at its most immediately obvious level refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research’ (2004:4). Rebecca Young puts it more succinctly, describing reflexivity as a ‘style of research that makes clear the researcher’s own beliefs and objectives’ (Young 2009). She adds that it is vital researchers pay attention to their own objectives in terms of where they want the research to go, and continually reflect upon how their own personal characteristics affect the data collection and subsequent findings, and writing. It’s a convoluted process whereby the researcher and the subject are intrinsically linked.

In my role as researcher and writer I engage in the practice of ethnographic participant observation. According to Aull Davies, in its classic form, participant observation consists of a single researcher spending an extended period of time (usually at least a year) living among the people he or she is studying, participating in their daily lives in order to gain as complete an understanding as possible of the cultural meanings and social structures of the group and how these are interrelated (2008:77). Young writes, 'seeing as the analysis of the data collected always contains a subjective element, it is important for the researcher to inform his audience that he recognises the research is not value-free...The reason for this shift in thinking is because of the increasingly popular postmodernist idea that there should be a greater focus on the role of the researcher in social research. In other words the research is dependent on the interpretations which the researcher gives to the data he collects' (2009).

Observation is a governing act in biographical life writing and no matter how much the researcher participates he or she remains primarily an observer. Young writes, 'Reflexivity represents a shift in our understanding of data and its collection. In ethnography the researcher has to acknowledge that his personal opinions and preconceptions...affect the way he interprets the data collected' (2009).

Karen O'Reilly regards the reflexive turn of the 1980s as a period when researchers under the influence of textual criticism, and cultural and literary theory, began to work more creatively. She writes, 'one thing critics in the reflexive turn noted was that many ethnographers traditionally had a tendency to write as if their account was the one true account, the one voice of authority' (O'Reilly 2005:210). As a result, findings were viewed as indisputable facts when in many instances they were mere interpretations, carefully considered, but interpretations none the less. Young encourages researchers to reflect upon questions like 'what do I know?' and 'how do I know it?' as a means of fostering an increasingly reflexive process of inquiry and discovery.

O' Reilly claims, 'Qualitative writers are off the hook, so to speak. They do not have to try to play God, writing as disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal and atemporal general knowledge,' (2005:961). As a response to the reflexive turn researchers can now bring more of themselves to the fore during the research process, and may in turn be changed themselves in some way by the experience.

Operating from the premise that ethnography is both a subjective and objective experience—I regard reflexivity as integral in constructing contemporary biographical narratives. Furthermore, reflective practice influences narratorial presence. The role of narrator is a purposeful reflexive phenomenon. Gillie Bolton (2010) writes, '*Reflexivity* is finding strategies to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions, to strive to understand our complex role in relation to others.'

Bolton suggests: 'Reflection is an in-depth consideration of events or situations outside of oneself: solitarily, or with critical support. The reflector attempts to work out what happened, what they thought or felt about it, why, who was involved...It is looking at whole scenarios from as many angles as possible: people, relationships, situation, place, timing, chronology, causality, connections, and so on, to make situations and people more comprehensible. This involves reviewing or reliving the situation to bring it into focus...Reflection might lead to insight...' (2010:13).

Appropriating a reflexive practice enables me to pay attention to what occurs in real time. This is integral in contributing to a contemporariness of Mount's identity. It is not enough that I mirror what is taking place. Bolton writes, 'reflective practice can fall into the trap of becoming only confessional.' Bolton recounts the problems encountered by Jennifer Nias research of the experience of women teachers in 1992. 'Nias noted with surprise that all her potential interviewees were keen to tell their autobiographies at length. People always

are, but they do not want their stories questioned: *this* is the role of reflective practice’ (2011:11).

To reduce the possibility of the Mount narratives being confessional I view observations and interactions through a more interpretive lens. ‘In order to retain political awareness and activity, professional development work needs to be rooted in the public and the political as well as the private and the personal’ writes Bolton (2011:11).

I interviewed Mount on many occasions during my research. I did not use the interviews as specific encounters in the narrative. I maintained a diary. It became a tool for writing notes, provided opportunity for reflection, and kept an account of my reading and research. It became a significant part of the reflexive process. After each interview I asked questions of the interactions. The following excerpt is from an early meeting with Mount. From this particular meeting I gain an understanding into Mount’s opinions and attitudes to Pauline, his parents, his work, and members of the glass community. By allowing him to come up with topics during the conversation I was able to identify what he saw as the priorities in his life; his level of commitment to work practice; attitudes to male and female relationships, and the organizational responsibilities Pauline maintains in his work. I focus on the personal but on reflection there is scope to bring greater political insights to the narratives.

It’s been bucking down rain all night and the roads are wet and slippery. The humidity is one hundred percent. I walk to the cafe – feeling nervous. Just before I leave to meet Nick at 10am I get an email from Pauline with the details of their movements for the rest of the year. I’m feeling hot and clammy. He’s late. He calls at about 10.15am he’s running late but on his way. I move to an outside table the cafe is sweltering and uncomfortable. He rolls up after 10.00am. He’s been to pick up the glass he made on the weekend and on Monday. His white grey hair is closely cropped, his complexion is almost alabaster and unlined and clear. No chicken in his diet pays off. He’s fit for his age and boyish in his movements. He’s been listening to an interview with Annie Proulx who is in Perth for the Writers Week. I mention I have her latest ‘Bird Cloud.’ Occasionally he sits upright in the cafe chair, lifts his shoulders, squares them off, I can almost see the individual vertebra realigning as he straightens up. He sits erect – there’s no slouching, not in the chair and not in life. He is a working artist. I buy him a strong flat white with an extra shot because he likes it

strong. I have my usual English Breakfast tea with a dash. He perks up – it must be the coffee. The rain is getting heavier and every so often a cool breeze sweeps across Tynte Street and blows past us and through the cafe. It's a relief. I now feel relaxed. The sky is heavy with rain and ready to bucket down again. His clear pale blue eyes are looking a little rheummy today.

He starts by checking his phone – he speaks to Paul and hears she has forwarded me the email. It's a good place to start the conversation.

I mention that I am looking at attending a few things and want to interview him in between the activities he's got coming up throughout the year. He hands over some raffle tickets and flyers. He had donated a piece of glass worth \$5000 and I have agreed to sell some tickets. They are raising money to bring Boyd Sugiki to the Jam Factory from Seattle to teach a workshop in September. He laughs. He actually laughs a lot. I've got my legs crossed toward him and as we continue chatting he crossed his legs toward me. Good sign. He's interested in talking.

He mentions the lack of contact with his gallery in the US – with connections to Sofa – doesn't sound good. They owe the Mounts money and have not been forthcoming.

He asks me how long I will be interviewing him – I explain that it's an organic process. That I am going to focus on all the things he's got coming up but may only chose to write about a few.

Tells me about a number of things coming up next year = he said in 2011 but I think he meant 2012.

He talks about how his parents are starting to be frail and unwell. His mother is getting senile. His father has a disease that is eating away the muscles in his legs. He has been asked to edit one of his dentistry books but has declined. His mother is still the nurse and his father considers himself creative in his dentistry and the publication of numerous books. His mother sees herself as create as a nurse and a homemaker.

He mentioned being caned in year twelve at Saint Peters College for spending too much time in the art room. 'Harsh' I say. 'Harsh' he says. It's a bitter memory. He mentions struggling with religion at school. Not knowing what to do about it. Once a day during the week, and twice a day when he was in the boarding house at Saints. It's Pauline's birthday next week. I asked how old she'll be – he said 57ish.

We arrange to meet once a week for an hour on Tuesdays at 10.30am.

I mention how at the conference some were trying to make a distinction between being a glass artist and a glass maker. He said he was a maker. It's who he is. I suggest 'it's who has become.' He said it's what he always was. Right from the beginning. He talks a bit about the 70s. He always sounds so nostalgic about the period. About being a hippie. Growing their own food – making their own furnaces. Starting with nothing – creating everything from scratch. Being creative, resourceful, self sufficient – it's a common thread of their life together.

We're sitting outside on the footpath and the rain is so heavy now that it's difficult to catch everything he's saying. His eyes dart around at the other cafe patrons. He mentioned Dale Chihuly – says he is the closest to the glass master of our time. Says CH is manic depressive and some say the decline of the glass art is because CH is on a downward spiral – that and the global economy.

Talks about how the Chinese are designing and mass producing high quality glass products that are good in design and beautifully made by Chinese glass makers.

Said that there is now a move toward design by people who no longer have the skills or the inclination to make the glass. It's a seismic shift in glass making. Where does it

leave the small glass maker in down town Adelaide? Time will tell but it sounds as if the writing is on the wall or is that the ruminations of an old time glass maker. Either way things in the glass movement are changing rapidly. He has been there in this country from the beginning. He was one of the main players.

He says Peta thinks she can change him – make him the way she wants him to be. N says philosophically that the difference between men and women. Men want women to always remain the same and never change. Whereas women want men to change for the better. I wonder who he’s actually talking about.

After an hour of chatting the rain was worse and he offered me a lift. We made a dash in the pouring rain to his white Holden Ute parked across the street; he did a u turn and dropped me off home. He was going home to work on putting some components together for the Photonics exhibition coming up at the Jam in late March.

8 March 2011

According to sociologist Brian Roberts, the emphasis on current biography has shifted to a greater reflexivity on part of the researcher. He encourages researchers to write about their own relationship, presence, and social background. He qualifies this by adding, ‘there is a difficulty in assessing how much of the personal life of the researcher should be considered and entered into the text’ (Roberts 2002:13). Reflexivity was an important consideration in determining my ‘presence’ in the narratives, and impacted on decisions about how and when I made my presence felt, whether through direct inclusion in the text, or through an incorporation of indirect writing devices such as tone and inference. It also proved integral in my analysis and interpretation of material.

In 2005, Jane Grant interviewed Janine Burke, author of *The Heart Garden* (2004), a biography of Sunday Reed and the artistic community at Heide. On the question of Burke’s reflexive approach Grant enquired: “I can see that this humanises your engagement with your subject and in a sense you become a player in the story that, in turn, becomes a record for future historians, but doesn’t this also remind the reader of the subjectivity of your account and raise questions about its reliability?” To which Burke replied, “I believe it’s a strategy that assists in making the work more reliable because it makes the whole process transparent. It draws the reader’s attention to my role in doing the research, in shaping the text” (2005:75). Grant’s line of questioning signals a lingering resistance to reflexive strategies in

biography. It also highlights the possible over representation of the author in the narrative.

Westbrook encourages writers to be aware of the potential of author reflexivity to overwhelm the narrative. He writes: ‘Understanding ethnographic performance as a communication with an audience helps to keep the work focused on the questions that engendered it, or to put the matter negatively, the audience helps to keep the navigator from becoming overly focused on herself. Presumably, audiences are interested in aspects of the world discovered through the ethnographic journey rather than the ethnographer’ (Westbrook 2008:115).

Westbrook suggests the end result will prove unsatisfactory without implementing a dynamic reflexive process of considerable thought and planning. ‘A refunctioned ethnography should operationalise critical reflexivity so that self consciousness is not merely deployed as a critique of texts and stances after the fact but is instead a part of the design and performance...from the beginning...given both the intellectual dangers inherent in reflexivity and the centrality of the navigator/author considerable discipline is required in order to prevent egotism, or merely self-indulgence from overwhelming the expression of an ethnography’ (2008:112).

Taking a reflexive approach determined many of the choices and influenced the style of my writing in a number of ways. The experiential method of gathering information diverges from traditional data collection processes. An inclusion of my responses to conversations and visual cues provides an additional level of authenticity. Additionally my presence in scenes vicariously illuminates sensory experiences for readers. Sarah Thornton writes about her reflexive approach in *Seven Days in the Art World* (2009). Thornton used the term ‘minutiae of the milieus’ to describe her interest in the small precise and trifling details in a social or cultural environment or setting in which something occurs or develops. She writes, ‘My choice of verbal and visual details is driven by whether they seem to reveal social structures, institutional frameworks or cultural patterns. As a result, a fair amount of salacious

and sensational material was left on the cutting room floor because it seemed anomalous or distracting' (2009:265).

Reflexivity in biographical texts is becoming increasingly more prevalent. Drusilla Modjeska incorporated personal ruminations in *Stravinsky's Lunch* (1999), she writes:

There is a story that's told about Stravinsky. Since it was told to me several years ago when I was first thinking about this book, it has fallen like a shadow across my page. It isn't much of a story, simply that when Stravinsky was in mid-composition, he insisted that his family ate lunch in silence. The slightest sound, a murmur, even a whisper, could ruin his concentration and destroy an entire work. It's not a particularly unusual story—great male artists have demanded more than that in the name of Art—and yet it has worked on me, and in me, for me, in ways that it has taken me a long time to understand. What began, for me, as an argument, has become taken into my life as a kind of mediation (1999:16).

Following the disintegration of Stella Bowen's marriage Modjeska writes, 'Above my desk is a postcard of Piero della Francesca's *St Michael*. As it's in the National Gallery in London, I know Stella couldn't have seen it in Italy in 1923. Nevertheless it has been a kind of talisman as I've tracked her story...More than any other version of St Michael, this one captures the combination of ordinariness and effort that goes into the slaying of the serpent...one that recognises the serpent as a part of our lives that has to be struggled with, even killed, again and again' (1999:76).

In this instance, Modjeska is firstly, reflexively writing herself into the text, and secondly, appropriating a metaphor from her own life and using it to signify the duplicity of Stella Bowen's relationship with the unfaithful Ford Maddox Ford. It is one of the driving metaphors for *Stravinsky's Lunch*, and Modjeska could have easily excluded an explanation about the source from which it originated. Instead, she communicates her train-of-thought to the reader; weaving yet another layer of complexity, intimacy and empathy into the narrative.

Modjeska writes about her amorphous yet meaningful connection with Stella Bowen. 'I can tell Stella Bowen's story: it's a story I know, a story I understand. I am of a generation which has lived its own version of that story: sex and love and betrayal, babies and work

(babies *or* work), Paris, cafes, a precarious independence. I am of a disposition that understands all too well the struggle between the desire to give in to the narrative of love and the almost automatic habit of keeping on, of somehow managing...all this I know (1999:212).

Art critic, Michael Peppiatt's, *Francis Bacon: studies for a portrait* (2008), is a collection of essays and interviews which portray the complex life and work of the late English painter, Francis Bacon. Peppiatt's narratives span more than forty years and convey various aspects of Bacon's artistic endeavours. The short narratives were written and published independently and brought together in this volume. The reflexivity in Peppiatt's writing differs to Modjeska's intimate and personal ruminations. It isn't so much in the details of the sketches and vignettes, but in the bold brush strokes that connect the different stories. Peppiatt avoids Modjeska's reliance on subjectivity, favouring a more objective critique. Nonetheless, he makes it clear in the introduction that the narratives have come about as a result of his personal and professional relationship with Bacon over many years.

He writes, 'Bacon was an eminently gregarious person, making passionate and often long-lasting friendships with a wide variety of people. Since I spent a great deal of time in his company, in London, Paris and occasionally elsewhere, I was able to see first-hand how some of these relationships were formed' (2008:4). By sharing knowledge of their close relationship, Peppiatt alerts the reader that he has been especially privy to aspects of Bacon's life, implying greater intimacy.

Peppiatt's decision to write at length about his own understanding of Bacon's relationship with his contemporaries also veers from the usual spotlight approach to biography, referred to by Stanley. In the chapter titled 'Francis Bacon and the School of London' the author writes, 'I have attempted to show Bacon in the context of a group of figurative artists deeply rooted in London. The connection between the artists discussed here are complex, since they have evolved out of a great deal of friendship and mutual admiration'

(2008:4). As authoritative as the text first appears, Peppiatt makes it patently clear that the stories about Bacon are born out of the unique and personal relationship between the two men. Although, there is no singular narrative arc in the text, the different narratives create an abstract portrait that renders Bacon clearly discernible.

Sociologist and writer, Laurel Richardson maintains: ‘The core of postmodernism is the doubt that any method or theory, any discourse or genre, or any tradition or novelty has a universal and general claim as the “right” or privileged form of authoritative knowledge’ (2005:961). Furthermore, she claims ‘writing is always partial, local, and situational and that our selves are always present no matter how hard we try to suppress parts of ourselves as well’ (2005:963). Richardson ascertains that in traditional ethnography researchers ‘deploy different methods – interviews, census data, documents, and the like to validate findings...but in CAP ethnography researchers draw from literary, artistic, and scientific genres, often breaking the boundaries of these genres as well’ (2005:963). Incorporating creative analytic practices (CAP) allows writers and researchers to adopt a more reflexive approach. Richardson’s four criteria of CAP ethnographies include: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, and impact.

She asks researchers contemplating a CAP approach to consider the following:

1. *Substantive contribution.* Does this piece contribute to our *understanding* of social life? Does this piece seem “true” – a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the “real”?
2. *Aesthetic merit.* Does the piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text and invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring?
3. *Reflexivity.* How has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make

judgments about the point of view? Does the author hold him or herself accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people he or she has studied?

4. *Impact*. Does this piece affect me emotionally or intellectually?

(Richardson 2005:964).

Richardson proposes an alternative way of viewing the manner in which research is structured. She suggests ‘the central imagery for “validity” for postmodernist texts is not the triangle—a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object ‘but rather the central imagery is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionality’s, and angles and approaches’ (2005:963). By adopting an alternative research approach the focus of inquiry shifts from one of empirical findings to one of endless creative possibility. Richardson suggests researchers relinquish traditional research methodologies and draw from a variety of literary, artistic, and scientific genres in preference to the traditional ‘triangulation’ approach. Creative analytical practices challenge the assumption of finding a validated ‘fixed point’ through interviews, census data, documents, and the like. She writes:

The ethnographic genre has been blurred, enlarged, and altered with researchers writing in different formats for a variety of audiences...CAP ethnographies herald a paradigm shift...CAP ethnography displays the writing process and the writing product as deeply entwined; both are privileged...How do the authors position themselves as knower and tellers? That’s what readers want to know. (Richardson 2005:962)

Qualitative researcher, Elizabeth Adams St Pierre notes, ‘I used writing as a method of data analysis by using writing to think: that is, I wrote my way into particular spaces I could not have occupied by sorting data with a computer program or by analytical deduction. This was rhizomatic work in which I made accidental and fortuitous connections I could not foresee or control’ (2005:977). Richardson and Adams St Pierre’s appropriation of creative analytical practices encourages the process of *writing as a method of inquiry*. Sociolinguist, Rubby Dhunpath suggest, ‘biographers achieve this configuration by crossing disciplinary

boundaries, allowing a number of disciplines to converge, while allowing disciplines to maintain its own integrity' (2000:545). Renegotiating disciplinary boundaries is a liberating research and writing process that allows narratives to take root, re-strike and propagate exponentially.

Ethnographic encounters provide enormous potential in recreating and restructuring the narratives of our lives. Ianziti writes, 'through what might be termed a combination of several disciplinary perspectives—history, ethnography, sociology—biography can perhaps become an effective means for recapturing and understanding an important dimension of human and social experience' (2003:13). The inference here is that our individual experiences, as singularly unique as they are, share a collective consciousness with universal appeal.

Susan Chase writes, 'what makes narrative ethnography distinct is that both the researcher and the researched are presented together within a single multivocal text focused on the character and processes of the human encounter' (2005:659). She suggests, 'this requires a certain kind of preparation before interviewing...narrative interviewing involves a paradox on the one hand, a researcher needs to be well prepared to ask good questions that will invite the other's particular story; on the other hand, the very idea of a particular story is that it cannot be known, predicted, or prepared for in advance' (Chase 2005:661-662). This is one of numerous dilemmas for researchers of biography. It takes time and careful consideration to plan how to start the questioning, while at the same time not fully knowing where it will lead. It is a dynamic venture into unknown territory with unexpected detours on the path to discovery.

The following excerpt written after my initial visit to Nick and Pauline Mount's home provides some insight into how elements of the narrative began to take shape.

3 December, 2010.

Went to the Mount's open studio yesterday. There were other people there as I walked through to the rear of the house and found Nick in the Studio talking to a small group out the back. After a warm hug he told me Pauline had just finished doing a quote for an installation at the Intercontinental Hotel in London. Japan may not happen but if it does I should visit them there. They will be doing a short visit to Chicago next year. Pauline had made non alcoholic punch and served Xmas cake on a tray. Nick was entertaining buyers in the studio and house. He asked 'have you met Ace,' (his grandson) and mentioned being a grandfather a few times. The house is small, quirky and comfortable. It's the heart of everything, where the family gathers, where they eat, sleep, work, fight and make love. Every nook and cranny is embellished in some way. He said 'if there's a bare wall – he'll cover it.' The house is an expression of their collective creativity- the objects, the colour, everything about it, the personality, who lives here, their history, how and when they moved in, who does what around the house, how they use the space, the studio, the garden. It's a vital ingredient in the creative mix. The Plumb Bob collection – needs further discussion – lots of stuff here. They are collectors – they must understand the psyche of a collector – are they obsessive? I realise I am obsessive – about people. Artists are all obsessive – they have to be to be able to stick at what they do. Understand that – and a lot of other stuff falls into place.

Need to start working out the structure – if not linear – then what?

Who is he really? Identity is being created all the time.

Things to incorporate - birth, family, relationships, significant others, education, travel, career beginnings, colleagues, work practices, forging a reputation, productivity, a taste of success, exhibitions,

Partnerships, creative and personal, prizes and awards, building profile, identity.

At the very core of his existence is the unremitting dedication to his work. This is the focal point of his life – and the cornerstone upon which all other relationships and activities rest.

My reflexive approach places me implicitly and explicitly in the text without dominating the physical or metaphorical space. Increased reflexivity infers greater subjectivity on the part of the researcher. The following excerpt is indicative of my presence:

Throughout the summer of 2011, I frequent the Jam to explore the full scope of Mounts glass vocabulary. Perth born, Tegan Empson, his assistant at the time is a JamFactory associate and accomplished glass artist exhibiting in Australia, the United States and London. One of her quirky pieces is held in the private collection of rock idol, Sir Elton John. She's slender fit and athletic with short spiky dark blond hair and her intelligent eyes are constantly shielded behind dark glasses.

"I saw the crescent – you saw the whole moon...too high, too far, too soon..." the Waterboys song blasts through the large cavernous tin studio as Mount pulls back from the glory hole with a large glowing gelatinous globe of red hot glass, soft and wobbly, dangling on the end of his pipe. He later tells me it weighs a couple of kilo but it looks a lot heavier. He rolls the glistening ball of hot glass against wads of newspaper and the studio fills with the smell of smoke. It reminds me of log fires on cold nights and is strangely comforting. Within seconds the bright orange glowing globe of glass fades to black and Mount inserts it back into the hot insatiable mouth of

the furnace. He retrieves it, pouts his lips into a glass blower's kiss, and shoots a quick short breath of air down the length of the pipe into the ball of glass. His warm breath forms an elastic skin on the inside of the glass blob that corresponds to the cooling exterior surface. The starter bubble cools so the hot glass doesn't collapse in on itself. Whipping up a blow torch from the floor he flames the glass to keep it soft. The complex and often dangerous glass blower tasks appear to come automatically, one after the other. There is little hesitation, and with not a second to waste, he intellectually, physically, and psychologically responds. In short—he's in the zone.

(George 2014:15)

I am present in the settings and scenes, and in the responses and emotions I convey. It is not my intention to overly focus on myself, it is more a matter of incorporating reflexivity to take the reader on my journey of discovery—to allow the reader to see what I see—know what I know. Allowing the reader to view the separate pieces of the puzzle allows sufficient space for them to derive their own meaning, not only from *what* information is presented but *how* it is presented.

Appropriating narrative nonfiction

'Narrative nonfiction writers report on the lives of people at work, in love, going about the normal rounds of life. They confirm that the crucial moments of everyday life contain great drama and substance.'

Norman Sims (1984:3)

The shift from nonfiction to narrative nonfiction in America and the ensuing struggle to name the genre that emerged in the 1960s evolved as a result of polarising debate between English and journalism studies (Joseph 2009:23). Describing developments in narrative nonfiction, American academic Norman Sims writes:

In the 1970s Tom Wolfe suggested that the New Journalism required scene-by-scene construction, saturation reporting, third-person point of view, and a detailing of the status of lives of the subjects. In 1984 the Literary Journalists broadened the set of characteristics to include immersion reporting, accuracy, voice, structure, responsibility, and symbolic representation. Writers I have spoken with more recently have wanted to add to the list a personal involvement with their materials, and an artistic creativity not often associated with nonfiction. An innovative genre that is still developing, literary journalism resists narrow definitions. (1995:9)

Narrative nonfiction has been described as literary journalism, new journalism, new new journalism, creative nonfiction, documentary journalism, and long form narrative, and this list is by no means complete. Some terms are used interchangeably to describe nonfiction with narrative as its most distinguishing feature. For the purpose of my research, I use the term narrative nonfiction, unless the phrase is used otherwise in citation.

Academic, Sue Joseph, conducted research into the genre in Australia which reveals, firstly, that a large majority of Australian nonfiction writers of narrative nonfiction do not consider themselves narrative nonfiction writers, and secondly, see no need to make a differentiation between nonfiction and narrative nonfiction; regarding them as one and the same. Nonetheless, a reticence in labelling oneself a narrative nonfiction writer on the part of Australian authors does not negate a propensity for further exploration of the genre. I agree with Joseph that, 'the writings of creative nonfiction authors in Australia are an integral part

of a social history, and as such must be studied and collated...But in terms of anthologising and recognising who the practitioners are, Australia has no canon' (2005:31-39). Joseph draws a distinction between narrative journalism and literary narrative. She writes, 'In Australia at least...some of the proponents of this type of long form narrative may well be literary but definitely do not regard themselves as journalists, nor what they do as journalism' (2009:33). Joseph suggests a more appropriate Australian branding may eventually emerge.

American narrative nonfiction writer, Mark Kramer (1995), considers the genre has a 'proper pedigree.' He cites examples of narrative nonfiction written by Daniel Defoe in 1700, Mark Twain in the 19th century, and 20th century, and later, American authors Ernest Hemmingway, John Steinbeck, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and Truman Capote. An American contingent of writers of the nineteen sixties and seventies continue to remain entrenched in the genre, including, John Mc Phee, Tracy Kidder, and Lee Gutkind.

Lee Gutkind clings to the term creative nonfiction and claims the term is self explanatory. 'The word 'creative' refers to the use of literary craft in presenting nonfiction—that is, factually accurate prose about real people and events in a compelling, vivid manner' (2008:12). In *The New Journalism* (1975), Tom Wolfe takes credit for establishing what became known in the 1960s as social realist journalism. Both New Journalism and narrative nonfiction share the same defining literary devices Wolfe calls 'techniques of realism' (1975:46). Wolfe credits American writer and journalist, Gay Talese, with 'introducing him to a new form of nonfiction, one that brought the reader into close proximity to real people and places through the use of accurately reported dialogue, scene-setting, intimate personal details, including the use of interior dialogue...in addition to the techniques that had been associated with fiction writers and playwrights' (2003:229).

In *The New New Journalism* (2005), Robert Boynton identifies another group of American writers expanding the genre, including Ted Conover, who worked as a prison

guard and lived as a hobo while researching his books. Boynton writes, ‘The New Journalism was a truly avant-garde movement that expanded journalism’s rhetorical and literary scope by placing the author at the centre of the story, channelling a character’s thoughts, using nonstandard punctuation and exploding traditional narrative forms.’ The distinction between early proponents and the newer versions of the genre lies in the methods and research styles. ‘Contrary to the New Journalists,’ writes Boynton, ‘this new generation experiments with the way one gets the story. To that end, they’ve developed innovative immersive strategies...their most significant innovations have involved experiments with the way they reported the story, rather than the language they used to tell it’ (2005: xii).

Ethnographic field work is undertaken to produce a textual outcome, that is, traditional dissertations or academic papers. Narrative nonfiction follows a similar trajectory of careful negotiation, suggestion, observation, investigation, and interpretation. The type of texts produced in the end will vary but the process is comparable. Westbrook writes, ‘a critical task for the ethnographer of the contemporary, the navigator, is convincing the subject to share his understanding of how his world hangs together...in doing so, individuals attempt, for their own ends and with varying degrees of sophistication and self-consciousness, the same thing that anthropologists do to describe their present situation.’ Additionally, writes Westbrook, ‘there is an ethnographic dynamic built into the structure of contemporary life; we are all ethnographers unto ourselves’ (2008:43).

Narrative nonfiction writers relinquish dependence on conventional information gathering techniques such as sit-down interviews in preference for alternative information gathering practices. Needless to say, the immersive process involves time hanging around, watching, waiting, listening, thinking, and formulating ideas before the writing begins. Narrative nonfiction writers are required to observe and understand a great deal to enable

them to write a little. Similarly, ethnographic participant observation involves a researcher spending extended periods of time with subjects.

American writer, Tracy Kidder, writes, ‘I take it on faith that the truth lies in the events somewhere and that immersion in those real events will yield glimpses of that truth’ (1981). Aull Davies suggests participant observation ‘is long-term personal involvement with those being studied, including participation in their lives to the extent the researcher comes to understand the culture as an insider’ (2008:81). Regardless of this level of immersion the researcher is expected to remain primarily an observer. Sarah Thornton comments on the role ethnography played in her experience writing about the international art scene during the tumultuous global financial crisis. She writes:

Social history is widely understood, but what is ethnography? It is a genre of researching and writing...it’s main investigative method is ‘participant observation’ – a cluster of qualitative modes, which include firsthand experience of the environment, careful visual observation, attentive listening, casual on-the-hoof interviewing as well as formal in-depth interrogation, and the analysis of telling details and documents...It was as a non-judgemental participant observer that I gained access, sought to understand these milieus thoroughly, and handled myself ‘in the field’. The art world is so full of warring factions that I have no idea how I would have managed the conflict if I were not in this role. (Thornton 2009:264)

Gay Talese writes poignantly about his immersive approach and the importance of listening. ‘I learnt to listen with patience and care, and never interrupt even when people were having difficulty in explaining themselves, for during such halting and imprecise moments people often are very revealing—what they hesitate to talk about can tell much about them. Their pauses, their evasions, their sudden shifts in subject matter are likely indicators’ (2003:229). The process of immersive research can be physically, geographically, emotionally, and intellectually demanding.

Gutkind is adamant narrative nonfiction writers can never employ literary licence to alter the truth to enhance narrative. They can, however, ‘utilize all the literary techniques available to fiction writers in order to render his or her story as dramatic, appealing, and

compelling as possible' (1997:32). Kramer regards the conventions of the genre as having 'no composite scenes, no misstated chronology, no falsification of the discernible drift or proportion of events, no invention of quotes, no attribution of thoughts to sources unless the sources have said they'd had those thoughts, and no unacknowledged deals with subjects involving payment or editorial control.' Furthermore, he ascertains that, 'today, literary journalism is a genre readers recognize and read expecting civil treatment. The power of the prose depends on the readers' accepting the ground rules the work implicitly proclaims.' Kramer also regards a writer's *voice*, 'without bureaucratic shelter,' as another of the genre's defining features that distinguishes it from other forms of nonfiction writing. He writes, 'in most literary journalism, an informal, competent, reflective voice emerges, a voice speaking with knowledgeable assurance about topics, issues, personal subjects, a voice that reflects—often only indirectly' (Kramer 1995).

The success of intrusive narrative nonfiction research depends on the relationship between researcher and subject. Kramer suggests writers should choose subjects who don't mind the attention and public exposure, seek to be represented, and are prepared to readily provide verbal, physical and emotional access (Hart 2011:147). Access, or the lack of it, can significantly influence the research and writing process and compromise the outcome. One writer who was not deterred by a lack of access was American journalist and pioneer of narrative nonfiction, Gay Talese. In 1965 Talese was sent by *Esquire* magazine to interview Frank Sinatra. Feeling the affect of a heavy cold, Sinatra refused to be interviewed. Talese was not deterred. He immersed himself in Sinatra's entourage, observing him from a distance, interviewed friends and family, and succeeded in writing *Frank Sinatra has a cold* (1966). The profile is still regarded as one of the most celebrated examples of narrative nonfiction. Writers of narrative nonfiction are required to be present, while disappearing into

the background. They are permitted access to ‘private spaces with the tacit understanding that household rules apply,’ cautions Kramer (Hart 2011:230).

Mount was generous with his time and accommodated my intrusions into his work schedule without complaint. Soon after commencing the project I became aware of a training workshop he was conducting in New Zealand. I thought this would be an ideal opportunity to observe him in the role of mentor. I contacted him and asked about the possibility of doing so. He faltered—said he wasn’t sure—that it was a private gallery—he sounded hesitant. I picked up on this and instead of pushing on with this request I changed tack and asked about another training workshop in Canberra. He immediately agreed to allow me to observe in Canberra.

In many instances narrative nonfiction writers force themselves into their subject’s lives. In order to write authentically about subjects Kramer suggests, ‘the writer requires sustained candour usually accorded only spouses, business partners, and dearest friends.’ Jack Hart, another American narrative nonfiction writer, considers there is a strong possibility of conflicting expectations between subject and writer and these need to be forthcoming and addressed from the beginning and throughout the process. Transparency is of the essence. Traditionally this degree of transparency was considered a violation, especially in respect to biasing the writing. However, Hart favours showing subjects unpublished manuscripts primarily to correct any errors. Reflexivity allows researchers to freely request and solicit feedback. Although this process can be fraught, it does provide the level of accuracy demanded of narrative nonfiction. In an interview, Mark Kramer remarked: ‘Accuracy can also insure the authority of the writer’s voice...You can blow your authority very quickly...that’s why I had farmers read my farm book in manuscript, and surgeons read the surgeon manuscript...I don’t want to get the details wrong’ (Sims 1984:16).

Near the completion of the project I gave a copy to Nick and Pauline. I asked them to correct any factual errors, and note areas which they considered I had misinterpreted or misunderstood. They contacted me after reading the draft and suggested a number of minor corrections regarding the spelling of people's names, dates, and sequence of events. They clarified a number of points where I had omitted sufficient details, but overall made no major changes. This reflexive process was both an opportunity to get the facts straight and, provide an opportunity for further discussion. Suffice to say on this occasion there were no dramatic differences of opinion. It could have proved otherwise, and that is one of the risks inherent in showing subjects the writing.

Hart suggests writers of the genre focus on three questions in relation to point-of-view. Beginning with who is telling the story, from which direction is it being told, and from what distance. (Hart 2011:44). Writers of narrative nonfiction may take various points of view from first-person to third-person omniscient and anything in between. Hunter S Thompson and gonzo journalists of the 1960s and 1970s positioned themselves front-and-centre in their stories with little regard for objectivity. Contemporary narrative nonfiction tends to favour a more balanced perspective.

I primarily occupy a third-person point of view in *Nick Mount: Blow by blow*. 'In third person you can turn yourself into a movie camera,' writes Hart, 'using vivid detail to frame external images of scenes and characters...peek inside the heads of characters...rise high above the scene to report what's going on at the same moment in distant places...even claim the prerogative of seeing into past and future with you-are-there- immediacy' (Hart 2011:47). This is illustrated in the following excerpt from *Nick Mount: Blow by blow*:

"Pauline and I are thinking of getting married," Mount told his dad nonchalantly a few months after they met. "Dad got all excited and mum gave me a diamond ring that was dad's mothers and it started me thinking...maybe getting married *is* a good idea."

It was a small family affair in the church in Morwell where Pauline's father's ashes are interred. Looking at their wedding photo today it's easy to discern a gentle

breeze whisking Pauline's shoulder length fair hair off her face. She is young and beautiful with laughing eyes that steer demurely away from the camera. You can't see the two-tone red and cobalt blue leather platform shoes with the huge rounded tips Nick claims to be wearing. He stands close to Pauline, their shoulders pressed against each other. She's in a simple white wedding dress that falls softly to the ground; a small brooch pinned at the neckline, and he in a safari suit, wide tartan tie, and those shoes. These days Mount jokes the allowance made available by Gough Whitlam for married students was an added bonus of getting married in 1974.

(2014:63)

Philip Gerard writes, 'factual writers of an earlier generation swore by a code of objectivity...If a reference to the actual person observing events was unavoidable, the writer would duck behind some impersonal shield' (Forche & Gerard 2001:50). Gerard suggests 'there is always a narrator doing the telling, and the narrator is not some fictional persona but the author' (2001:51). In numerous instances I enter the narrative using the upright pronoun 'I'.

Stance is an important consideration in constructing narrative nonfiction. I continually ask myself where to point the metaphorical lens and how close to get to the action. Again it is to Hart I return for guidance on how best to navigate the invisible continuum of dramatic to summary stance. Hart suggests researchers work from an ideological paradigm he calls the 'ladder of abstraction', whereby the metaphorical ladder rises from concrete levels of ideas through an increasingly abstract series of categories. Writing from the lowest rungs of the ladder puts you in the scene, thus pulling the reader into the thick of it. As you climb the ladder, the classes of things represented reach further across time and space, hence the notion of summary narrative (Hart 2011:57). Writers can take a dramatic stance to engage readers to begin with, and move in and out of summary mode thereafter.

Scenes are the building blocks of narrative nonfiction. 'Images from the bottom of the abstraction ladder have the sharp focus that convinces readers they're dealing with the real thing' (Hart 2011:95). Stepping up the ladder to describe colleagues, community, significant others, for example, creates a social, political and cultural context in which the subject

resides. The following passage from *Nick Mount: Blow by blow* illustrates how this style of contextual layering provides additional narrative meaning:

“My own personal worth is determined by my skill with glass,” he tells them, rolling his first gather on the cold marver. “Hold the pipe in your mouth, blow, then put your thumb over the end. Once the cold air is in it builds up pressure slowly. The blow is important.”

I move a little too close to the furnace and am blanketed in searing heat. A large discarded fragment of freshly blown glass shatters in the cullet bucket about a metre behind me. As the hot molten glass cools quickly it explodes and brittle shards ricochet against the inside of the metal bucket. A splinter of glass piecing my flesh is a real possibility and in the likelihood a missile escapes the bucket I move out of the firing line. Again I am reminded the glass studio is no place for the faint hearted. In the wink of an eye things can go terribly wrong and a lot of glass blowers have the scars to prove it. Netty shows me a pale scar on her upper arm where she inadvertently leant against a hot pipe while assisting Clare Belfrage a few years ago. The skin on her arm has healed and the scar has faded, but the excruciating contact of flesh and flame is a painful memory of a momentary loss of concentration. She’s philosophical about the harsh realities that come with the territory.

In 1915 the Powerhouse supplied Canberra with coal-generated electricity. The piercing whistle that once signalled start and knock-off time and could be heard kilometres away stopped disturbing the locals in 1957. The fitter and turners, boiler makers, firemen, and general labourers vacated the premises decades ago. In 2007, after 50 years of abandonment, the old building became a significant part of the urban renewal Kingston Foreshore Redevelopment. The original historic roof trusses, drill press, and huge exhaust fan is retained in the ground floor Economiser Room. Today waste heat from the glass furnaces boil the water, which circulates through pipes in the floor to heat the building. The blazing foundry fires and deafening steam-driven turbines no longer light up Canberra with electricity but the iconic building continues to illuminate the imagination.

(2014:100)

The amount of exposition can differ depending on the style of narrative nonfiction writing.

I employ a style referred to as explanatory narrative nonfiction. It enables me to increase the amount of exposition in the narrative structure, accomplished by juxtaposing story line with regular digressions. These digressions serve as textual hyperlinks that provide deeper understanding of topics and themes and increases sensory experience. Hart writes:

Two structural elements drive the twin missions of an explanatory narrative. The action line creates its overall shape. It draws readers into the narrative by exploring new places, introducing new people, and creating dramatic tension, if only because the reader doesn’t know what will happen next. But digressions provide the actual explanation, placing the action line in some larger context. Action takes place on the

lower rungs of the ladder of abstraction, where emotion rules. Explanation takes place further up the ladder, where meaning holds sway. (2011:186)

Explanatory narrative nonfiction utilizes variations in narrative content and structure.

A conventional Aristotelian narrative arc in fiction and nonfiction often follows an orderly progression from beginning to middle to end. The arc is the vehicle which provides a sequence of events to keep the story moving. It begins with a blend of action and exposition about characters and envisaged complications, followed by rising action, crisis, climax, and finally denouement to wrap things up. Explanatory narrative nonfiction does not adhere to this type of narrative arc. Instead, it employs layers of digressions and scenes to tell the story. Scenes act as entry points into the digressions that surround them. Hart suggests, 'to get the scenic detail, on the one hand, and the larger thematic meaning, on the other, narrative writers must range farther up and down the ladder of abstraction' (2011:191).

Explanatory narrative nonfiction can go beyond conventional sources and often regards the inconsequential as pertinent. Kramer suggests human beings in explanatory narratives are often bit players—helping to draw the narrative along with their words and actions. 'Walking talking human beings that populate most explanatory narratives are the vehicles the writer uses to explore the subject at hand' (Hart 2011:196). Writers frequently digress from scene to exposition, and direct their attention from the specific to the universal. The power of explanatory narrative lies as much in the potency of reality as its convoluted structure. It utilizes some, but not all, fiction writing elements. 'All the elements of a true story narrative seldom figure in the layer-cake approach', writes Hart. Adding 'explanatory narratives may stick with a principal character...don't usually pursue a full story structure...but share a few brief episodes that serve as windows into their world' (2011:198). The following excerpt from *Nick Mount: Blow by blow* demonstrates a 'layer-cake' explanatory narrative.

“My most recent works have been designed and made in reference to my belief in the fabric of work, with tools as the motif. The *Plumb Bob* that has appeared as a component in the *Scent Bottles* for quite some time has become more of an object in its own right. *Suspended Bobs*, *Reclining Bobs* and, for this exhibition, the *Bubble* of a spirit level, are all indicators of *Plumb*.” According to Mount “it’s *all* about the work.”

German sociologist, Max Weber’s thesis about the prevalence of the Protestant work ethic in society at the turn of the twentieth century may throw a little light. Weber believed there was a moral imperative that basically guaranteed that people who worked hard were rewarded. Even without protestant religious overtones, the notion of a solid work ethic continues to underpin the culture and societies in which many of us live. But why has work become one of the central motivating and aesthetic forces of Nick Mount’s creative and artistic practice?

I’ve come to the conclusion that it has a lot to do with the way he’s wired, a combination of nature and nurture. He was raised to work hard. He loves nothing better than to work hard. He’s committed. He starts early, applies himself, and retires at the end of the day tired and satisfied. He’s been that way since discovering glass and I suspect will continue in the same vein until he is no longer able to be so.

American psychologist and pioneer of the psychological study of creativity, Howard Gruber, makes a distinction between task-orientated and ego-orientated behaviour in relation to an individual’s attitude to work. According to Gruber, “Ego-orientation, or extrinsic motivation, refers to an attitude towards work that is motivated by desire for rewards such as recognition, prestige, prizes, money, privileges, and power. Task-orientation or intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, refers to an attitude toward work that is motivated by the intrinsic nature of the task itself.” Mount’s passion and motivations for work encompass both, but the latter has evolved as a dominant driving force.

(2014:45)

This explanatory narrative approach suits stories about the human condition because our lived experiences in real time do not tend to follow predetermined sequences, or climax with neat resolutions. Supplementary details add substance to the narrative. Additionally, the digressive capabilities of narrative nonfiction make it well-suited to the World Wide Web. ‘In the future, we will probably see more convergence of this genre and this medium. Web pages can be enhanced and made more readable by the use of narrative and other techniques of literary journalism. And it is likely that literary journalism can and will be taken in new directions by the techniques and devices of the Web’ (Royal & Tankard 2002:20). The collection of encounters are devoid of one single narrative arc, nevertheless, each is representative of many other similar encounters in his life and, as such, provide insight into the formation of Mount’s identity.

Reshaping the narrative

‘Imposing a narrative is...a device we use to order the mess of material to make it tell a story, but the ordering or narrative may be imposing sequence where you might not want it. You may want to leave some sense of the disordered nature of reality in your writing.’

O’Reilly (2005:221).

In many instances contemporary biographical writing takes the form of narrative ethnography. Chase writes, ‘like traditional ethnography this approach involves long-term involvement in a culture or community; like life history, it focuses heavily on one individual or a small number of individuals. What makes narrative ethnography distinct is that both the researcher and the researched are presented together within a single multivocal text focused on the character and process of the human encounter’ (2005:659).

Oakley mentions two metaphors for biographical writing, that of portraiture and sculpting. Both are about creating vivid impressions—artefacts that can be recognised as likenesses, but which, more importantly, are experienced as transmitting the essence of a person (2010). The re-structuring of contemporary biographical writing allows writers to explore a multiplicity of ways in which to shape narrative and construct meaning. Writing about the relationship between identity formation and narrative, Christina Lonardi writes:

‘The fragmented identity of postmodern man finds an opportunity to affirm itself in narrative, using it to give its constituent fragments sense by connecting them to each other...narrative thus appears as an accumulation of small fragments of stories heard, stories listened to, stories read...restoring meaning to oneself and contributing to the rereading and rewriting of one’s own story and to the opening on reality, thereby aiding the construction of personal identity’ (2011).

Edgar Kiser defines narrative as, ‘the organization of material in a chronologically sequential order and the focus of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with sub-plots’ (2001:220). Meaning comes from the decisions and choices writers constantly make while constructing, or in the case of biography, reconstructing narratives. The manner in which a writer shapes narrative, influences, attributes, and contributes to the creation of its

meaning. According to David Carr, ‘Narrative is a tool for shaping experience not just recording it’ (2001:198).

Biographers collect information until such time as they begin to shape and structure the narrative. During this shaping process the writer simultaneously participates in the phenomenon of meaning construction, through the choice they make, including, language, syntax, topic, theme, and genre. Deciding on a narrative structure is an integral part of shaping the narrative. Dhunpath writes, ‘Biographies and other forms of life writing enables the reconstruction and interpretation of subjectively meaningful features and critical episodes...allowing us to see unities, continuities, and discontinuities, images, and rhythms’ (2000:544).

Making reference to Hermione Lee’s 1996 biography *Virginia Woolf* Mark Kinkead-Weekes writes: ‘The rejection of strict chronology has a price—all the clearer because it is a matter of method, not of talent,’ (France 2004:248). Lee’s biography of Woolf cuts through a strict chronological narrative in preference for a thematic narrative structure. This method, argues Kinkead-Weekes, ‘foreshortens’ the complexities of Woolf’s life. In his opinion, important incidents are skimmed-over and left unconnected—which would not have occurred if a strict chronological linear narrative was adhered to. He argues without a strict chronology ‘there will be too many spaces, unknowns, opacities, for this to be more than partial’ (France 2004:251). This criticism came from Kinkead-Weekes after Lee produced more than seven hundred and seventy pages of narrative and no less than one hundred and thirteen pages of dense endnotes.

Kinkead-Weekes argues that ‘although an avidity for judgement is one of the less admirable fascinations of biography and no biographer can be wholly free from presupposition and prejudice—the chronological method does tend to delay verdicts until there has been sufficient exploration of process and development’ (France 2004:251). But,

even Kinkead-Weekes concedes, ‘everyone of its gains will increase the length, slow the pace, and involve a degree of repetition,’ furthermore ‘to be able to treat relationships or problems thematically, abstracted from chronology, brings obvious advantages in both clarity and economy’ (France 2004:251).

Susan Chase writes, ‘Narrative is retrospective meaning making—the shaping and ordering of past experience. Narrative is a way of understanding one’s own and other’s actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions over time...Unlike a chronology, which also reports events over time, a narrative communicates the narrator’s point of view, including why the narrative is worth telling in the first place...narratives also express emotions, thoughts, and interpretations’ (Chase 2005:656). Additionally, writes Chase, ‘when someone tells a story, he or she shapes, constructs, and performs the self, experience, and reality’ (Chase 2005:657). Chase is asserting, and I concur, that narrative does not only imbue meaning, it is part of a simultaneously dynamic process of identity formation for the narrator or story teller. Chase views narratives as ‘socially situated interactive performances...a joint production of narrator and listener, whether the narrative arises in naturally occurring talk, an interview, or a field work setting’ (Chase 2005:657).

At about 35,000 words into *Nick Mount: Blow by blow* I began to feel more comfortable about positioning myself in the narrative. Up until then it was a matter of staying out of the limelight. But why? The answer lies in my own inexperience as a biographer. But the research, the process, the writing, the developing relationships over time increased my confidence, or at least, encouraged me to make myself increasingly more visible in the narrative. Mount has been making glass for almost his entire life and he publically declares ‘I am a maker’, and in doing so becomes the maker he wants to be. It’s a self fulfilling prophesy. I came to the realisation that by researching and writing narratives about Mount I

was simultaneously contributing to the process of was writing myself into the narrative.

Through the process I grew more confident and in subsequent re-drafts, more visible.

In *Narration: in search of lost meaning* (2011), Cristina Lonardi refers to late French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu's theories on the importance of reflexivity in the construction of meaning. Lonardi writes:

It is an illusion that a coherent history of social identity can be constructed, as biographies are discontinuous and incoherent by definition, just like the lives they depict...this is reinforced by the biographer who is naturally inclined, especially through his formation as a professional interpreter, to accept this artificial creation of meaning...Bourdieu claims that it is not possible to conceive of life in terms of a story, or as a linear path which develops from a starting point through a series of stages to reach an end. Life cannot be considered as a whole, accompanied by coherent intentionality or clear planning aimed at reaching a goal that gives meaning to existence...life can no longer be treated as a coherent narrative of a significant and directed sequence of events: it is a rhetorical illusion that comes to us from the literary tradition (2011:46).

Nonetheless, we mould lived experiences into narrative. Lonardi suggests that it is precisely because 'an individual life is not a story...that attempts are made to render it so' (2011:46). This premise is implicit in rendering contemporary biographical narratives. 'The de-institutionalization of biographies and life paths,' writes Lonardi,' and the fact that they are increasingly exposed to deviations with increasingly uncertain transient routes makes the need for sharing and mutual recognition fairly strong and urgent. This is because the more uncertainty is shared among individuals, the more bearable it becomes, and narrative carries out precisely this function of sharing and restoring or discovering lost meaning' (Lonardi 2011:49).

The collection of narratives is intended to be read as a whole. As previously stated, it veers from the traditional biographical narrative. Consequently, determining a structure to bring the separate encounters together was a primary consideration. To accomplish this I employ features of narrative connection, and achronological structure.

According to Noel Carroll, the distinguishing feature of narrative connection that differentiates it from conventional history or personal narrative, is that ‘to count as a narrative connection, a discourse representing a series of events must be about a unified subject...that is, the events, and/or states of affairs must be connected; they cannot simply be a list of *disconnected* events and/or affairs.’ Additionally, he suggests that narrative, ‘requires both a unified subject and a perspicuous temporal order whereby a perspicuous temporal order means a retrievable one’ (2001:23). In other words, for a story to be considered as having narrative connection it need not follow a clearly obvious string of events, or follow a chronological time ordering, however, the temporal order eventually must be able to be determined by an informed reader. Carroll acknowledges readers generally prefer sign posts in order to begin to comprehend where the narrative is going. An earlier major event may prove cause and effect, alternatively a series of minor events may be jointly sufficient in the production of a later event.

These two elements alone do not sufficiently qualify for Carroll’s concept of narrative connection. For Carroll, narrative connection also requires a change implying evidence of a causal process: ‘A narrative connection entails some chronicle although a mere chronicle does not entail a narrative’ (2001:31). Furthermore, Carroll is resolute that the anticipatory nature inherent in narrative must be present and understood. He suggests, ‘as narratives proceed, piling up more and more causally necessary conditions, the range of possible subsequent events shrinks...narrative anticipation is a matter of forming expectation on the basis of what events are possible, given earlier events in the story’ (2001:39). The challenge and subsequent success for experimental and nonlinear narratives depends to a large degree on whether they adequately provide a sense of direction and satisfactorily meet reader expectations.

Not that it need be heavy handed. Earlier events may simply offer a range of possibilities in an overall narrative. This does however require that, ‘the earlier event in a narrative connection is *at least* a necessary contribution to a sufficient, though non-necessary condition for the occurrence of a relevant later event in the narrative...in a great many cases, earlier events merely function to make later events [or conditions] causally possible’ (2001:28, 29). The strength and weakness of the presence of narrative cause and effect can vary dramatically.

Geoffrey Roberts writes, ‘For the biographer his subject’s life may have a unity and pattern which he seeks to render intelligible. It constitutes a whole, although not an “all-at-once” whole. To discover such a pattern, which may not be at all obvious, is not a matter of tracing a series of events, each related in a linear fashion to the next; rather, it is a matter of analysing the character of his subject, relating his traits of character to his specific activities and decisions, and to his various accomplishments and failures’ (2001:56).

Discussing alternative structural options in biography, Philip Furia writes, ‘biographers have to resist the impulse to tell readers *everything* they have learned about their subject...they need to find the story they want to tell...and they should create a narrative pattern other than the chronological—and then and then and then’ (Forche 2001:68). Nevertheless, readers have to be able to have sufficient information to piece the narrative together. Donald Polkinghorne asserts, ‘Narrative ordering makes individual events comprehensible by identifying the whole to which they contribute...narrative is a meaning structure that organises events and human actions into a whole thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effects on the whole’ (1988:18).

Contemporary biographers experiment with narrative structural elements as part of both the research and writing process. In *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*

(1985), Richard Holmes physically walked in his deceased subject's footprints for months to create 'the living effects, while remaining true to the dead facts' (Homburger & Charmley 1988:332). In doing so, Holmes illuminated his subject's environment in ways that could not be achieved from exclusively written sources alone. It also provided a reflexive account of his experiences along the path of discovery.

The decision to experiment thematically with structure in the narratives came prior to undertaking any research. At the commencement of the project I was unaware of what themes would emerge, however, as the project progressed themes began to appear in the encounters I observed. It became evident Mount's creative and artist practice emanated from his place in glass culture, and as such, could be best understood in light of the relationships he maintains in the society in which he lives and works. Roberts recommends, 'every biographer must appeal to a knowledge of the society in which his subject lives if the nature of that person's activities are to be explained...if we are to understand the choices open to a specific person and the goals which he sought to attain, we must make reference to social situations in which those choices took place' (2001:56).

Narrative structural considerations need to be accompanied by choices of textual references styles. Generally speaking, traditional biography has extensive references clearly discernible in the body of the text. The desire to create smoother narratives uninterrupted by copious citations makes this type of referencing incongruent for narrative nonfiction and some narrative nonfiction comes without any citations. In *Nick Mount: Blow by blow* I have chosen to credit sources with discreet citations in the form of endnotes at the end of the text.

Writers choose the structural frame or plots on which to hang narrative and as a consequence hold authorial sway in determining whether there are sufficient events to create an overall narrative. *Nick Mount: Blow by blow* is not plot driven in that there is no singular linear thread running through the narratives. Yet, the separate narratives are placed together

in such a way as to create a forward motion in the development and depiction of Mount's life as a glass artist. According to Donald Polkinghorne, 'emplotment is not the imposition of a ready-made plot structure on an independent set of events; instead, it is a dialectical process that takes place between the events...discloses their significance and allows them to be grasped together as parts of one story...generating unique and novel configurations' (Polkinghorne 1988:19). With this in mind, *Nick Mount: Blow by blow* is constructed with a number of events depicting particular themes. The significance of individual events becomes apparent when viewed in relation to other events.

Conclusion

Volume one of this thesis, *Nick Mount: Blow by blow*, is an example of how an increased ethnographical approach to life writing enhances the construction of contemporary identity, where contemporariness, that is, the extant qualities of a subject's lived experience is under investigation.

Revealing Mount's creative and artistic practices in narrative provides a portrait of the artist, challenges the perception of artists as frivolous and risky entertainers, and reveals Mount's contribution to Australian artistic culture. A contemporary construction of Mount's identity emerges in the series of encounters between myself and the artist. These encounters act as entry points which reveal aspects of Mount's creative and artistic practice and exemplify significant themes and experiences in contemporary life.

Volume two, *Reconfiguring biography: A genre in motion*, argues contemporary identity formation is enhanced through the appropriation of an increased ethnobiographical frame work, incorporating key elements of ethnography, narrative nonfiction, and nonlinearity.

A brief review of the history of biography reveals it is a genre in motion. Narratorial subjectivity has replaced Victorian objectivity. Developments in present day biographical writing have arisen as a consequence of changes in research and writing methodologies. These include Freudian psychoanalytic theories, Modernism, Poststructuralism, Feminism, Social Constructionism, and the experimental writings of Australian biographers.

An ethnobiographical approach offers an opportunity through which to observe and reflect upon aspects of Mount's creative and artistic practice as it occurs in real time; an essential component in the construction of contemporary identity. In contemporary ethnography the roles of observer and participant are blurred. As a consequence, the

boundaries between researcher and subject enable greater scope for reflexivity, making for a more expansive research experience.

Reflexivity, a key component of ethnobiography acknowledges authorial power and reduces the intensity of its domination. Increasing the biographers' presence is but one method of utilizing the many threads of a complex reflexive matrix. Reflective practice influences authorial presence. Researcher's autobiographies are now incorporated into their subject's narratives. This facilitates a multiplicity of perspectives and contributes to the creation of contemporary stories for each. This approach adds transparency to the process, provides a multitude of interpretations, and an increased level of authenticity. Current reflexive practice encourages more of the author's presence, thus raising the volume of their subdued personal murmurings, and expanding the scope and dimensions in which writers are able to recreate an individual's lived experience.

A distinguishing feature of both ethnography and narrative nonfiction of particular importance to this project is immersion. Narrative nonfiction has the scope to create scenes from real life and to address readers directly, make personal comment, give opinions, introduce relevant material, refer to history, be in the present, and bring in future possibilities. Readers can re-engage with narrative scenes after significant expository digressions. This type of exposition is the backstory readers need to better understand contemporary narratives. The type of explanatory narratives created in *Nick Mount: Blow by Blow* is a strong point in constructing narratives of Mount's lived experiences in real time with no need for neat resolutions.

Themes in narrative nonfiction have the capacity to tell universal stories about people's lives. Narrative nonfiction does more than just report the facts. Narrative born out of facts and events imbued with emotion and truth creates understanding and meaning. In *Nick Mount: Blow by blow* the facts underscore individual narratives which accumulatively

reveal a universal story about the importance work plays in crafting not only a livelihood but Mount's identity. It's a common theme among artists and individuals whose identity grows from the labours of their creativity. The separate encounters are central to how, why, when, and with whom this identity formation process takes place in real time.

Narrative nonfiction readers are not necessarily taken on the Aristotelian protagonist journey of struggle, crisis, and resolution; nonetheless, this doesn't preclude stories about the protagonist's struggles, developments, and change. Narrative nonfiction enhances the construction of a person's contemporary identity because it relies, to varying degrees, on stories that move from real life scene to scene and incorporate realistic dialogue to involve readers and establish characters. It employs various points of view to provide immediacy and increase emotional reality, characters and events. It focuses on everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles, behaviours, and other details, that together add up to a realistic account of how and why people express themselves the way they do.

Although, *Nick Mount: Blow by blow* maintains a strong narrative connection. The presence of a perspicuous temporal order is not chronological but discernible, and the causal processes where earlier events contribute to later events have discernible connections of cause and effect. Mount's identity is constructed through incrementally revealing some, but not all of his lived experiences; a process of reconstructing identity through accumulative revelation in real time.

Contemporary biography is no longer locked into linear narrative structures that begin with the birth of the subject and end with their demise.

This thesis contributes to a growing body of knowledge surrounding developments in the genre of biography. It is envisaged that explorations into the ethics, and issues pertaining to working with the living subject, and further discussions and analysis of the role of the narrator would prove beneficial.

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