

Narrative Reticence: The Case of Henry Stob

by Theodore Plantinga

Some years ago, when I worked as an editor for a publishing company, I was given a manuscript to consider for publication as a book. It was written by a minister in the denomination with which I was also affiliated. The manuscript was autobiographical: the pastor proposed to "tell all." It looked interesting, but it turned out to be rather dull. As I read it became clear to me that its author did not propose to resign his calling; it was not a "kiss and tell" book through which he would take leave of his career as a pastor.

My impression was that this would-be author had gotten cold feet, narratively speaking. I sympathized and understood the pastor's narrative reticence, but I also recommended against publishing his book. I sent the man a letter, explaining briefly why our company declined to accept his book for publication. Some years later I saw that the book eventually made it into print elsewhere. I did not read it again, and so I cannot say whether the version that was eventually published lived up to the "tell all" promise. Perhaps its author introduced some significant changes in response to my comments about his manuscript.

But if the pastor did manage to "tell all," would anyone believe him? Post-modernism has taught us to distrust first-person discourse. Perhaps there is no longer a line between "true stories" and fiction. There are people who apply the term "novel" to both -- a novel is basically a story, and whether the story is "true" or not seems almost beside the point.

I still work with the distinction between truth and fiction. And I believe strongly that there is value in narratized reminiscence. But on one occasion a few years back, when I was explaining these things in my philosophy of history class, I took an additional step by inviting students to construct small true narratives of their own which I would read. I even asked that some of those narratives be presented orally in class. (The class was too large to offer this opportunity to every student.) While I did get some interesting results, I must confess that on the whole I had to contend with great reluctance. Narrative

restraint or reticence is strong among the students I teach at Redeemer College, many of whom hail from the same denominational background as the pastor who stopped short of telling all when he actually put pen to paper.

When I urge the construction of personal narratives aiming at truth, it does occur to me that I ought to set a good example myself. And so I have, on occasion, done so in my class. And I have sometimes pondered the prospect of going further in terms of practicing what I preach, namely, by writing memoirs when I retire someday. But then doubts assail me: would anyone want to ready the autobiography of a philosophy professor?

Just recently I discovered that the answer to this question is yes. It came to me when I read the memoirs of a philosophy professor named Henry Stob (1908-96), under whom I studied medieval philosophy when I was a first-year student at Calvin College during the spring semester of 1964-65. The book is entitled *Summoning Up Remembrance*, [1] and it turned out to be a whole lot more interesting than I expected. As I read, I thought I should write something about the book and recommend it to others. But what I am going to say in this essay is not in the nature of a review.

I would like to say that the book is compelling reading and that you, dear reader, are sure to enjoy it as much as I did. But I can't quite bring myself to say that, for I suspect that *my* reasons for finding this memoir interesting might not apply to you. First of all, there is the personal connection. Although I did not come to know Prof. Stob well during that one course, I do retain a very distinct impression of him and his manner of teaching. Secondly, there is an interesting parallel between Stob's career and my own. Much of the book is an account of what it was like to serve as a one-man philosophy department in a small Reformed Christian college (400 students or so). That's exactly what I have been doing these past fifteen years. Thus I found the "shop talk" quite interesting and relevant to my own situation.

The book has another significant limitation which might put some readers off: it is not finished. In effect it is Volume I, although it is not labeled as such. The story progresses to the year 1952, when Stob left Calvin College to become a professor at Calvin Seminary, which is a separate institution on the same campus. (After this move, he still taught the occasional part-time course in the college, which is how I got into his class.) Presumably a second volume (or perhaps a much longer book) was planned, but illness intervened. Prof. Stob died last year. When I made inquiries about the rest of the story not told in the book, I was told that the book is all there is. Yet, though incomplete, it is well worth reading.

Still, the book suffers from narrative reticence. At certain points, one wishes there had been an interviewer to press Stob about some matter under discussion and to insist that he flesh out an interesting story told all too briefly. In what follows, I propose to discuss three aspects of this reticence, namely, personal modesty, the desire to keep certain institutional matters confidential, and the need to deal with opponents in a Christian manner.

Personal modesty. Writing is not in itself a departure from personal modesty, but the widespread publication of what one has written comes close to it. A little voice whispers in your ear: "Who do you think you are that you have to tell your story to the whole world?" Perhaps you defend yourself by adopting the mode of confession. Alan Watts, in his own autobiography, observes: "Generally speaking, the task of autobiography so embarrasses the writer that he must either boast or confess." A Calvinist knows he should not boast, but Watts is clearly no Calvinist. He observes: "In an autobiography one must surely be allowed to boast, just for fun." [2]

Stob's brand of modesty when he tells tales about his Chicago boyhood; yet one wishes that more had been said about this period, which Stob regards as an extension of the nineteenth century. Later in the book there are a number of occasions when death enters the story, including the death of the first child born to Prof. Stob and his wife. These situations are dealt with sensitively. The story of Stob's relation to the woman who became his wife is also told in brief terms. About the marriage as such we do not learn much, but we are told that there came a time when finances dictated that Stob was to remain in Europe for post-doctoral study while his wife returned to the United States and earned some money to help keep the family afloat. (They had no children then.) The passage in which Stob comments on the difficulties faced by a husband and wife when they come together again after such a time apart (see pp. 195-7) is well-written, provocative, and also indicative of how much is missing from this text. In his modesty, Stob leaves a good deal untold. In such a passage I was impressed more with his narrative potential than with his actual narrative accomplishment.

As I read Stob and pondered his modesty, I thought of another former teacher of mine who has written autobiography but did not feel constrained to the same degree when it comes to dealing with the inner life and the feelings that accompanied difficult situations. I am thinking of Jill Ker Conway, under whose tutelage I did some graduate work in history at the University of Toronto. Unlike Stob, Conway *did* write that second volume. Her early years are covered in *The Road from Coorain* (1989) and the story continues in *True North* (1994). What she writes in these books about her own struggles in

relation to her mother is remarkable in terms of narrative candor: see especially *True North*, pp. 198-9.

Another autobiography that came to mind in terms of the issue of personal modesty is entitled *Now You Know*. [3] Its author, Kitty Dukakis, was in a good position to become "First Lady" of the United States when her husband ran for President in 1988 on the Democratic ticket. It happens that he was defeated by George Bush, and so Mrs. Dukakis was spared the media scrutiny that is usually focused on the occupants of the White House. In her book she reveals what a battle she had been fighting against alcohol abuse, in particular, and what degrading situations she sometimes got into -- and also how nobly her husband stood by her and tried to help her. As I read the painful passages in this book (see especially pp. 301-5), I thought to myself that even if I did one day go through such agonies and humiliation, I would probably not be capable of writing about it in such frank terms. Sometimes modesty serves as a shield.

Confidentiality. The second aspect to the narrative reticence in Stob's book flows from the need for confidentiality. Any man of public affairs must search his soul when he sets pen to paper to produce memoirs. The famous Indian leader M.K. Gandhi recognized the problem and stated: "I shall have to omit important details because most of the characters in the drama are still alive, and it is not proper without permission to use their names in connection with events with which they are concerned." [4] In our society we balance posterity's need to know against the desires of individuals to maintain their privacy. A good way to strike such a balance is to keep many documents secret for a specified period of years. Indeed, some autobiographical materials are also left to lie for a period of years until it is thought that they can be published without causing too much hardship and grief.

The desire to protect people and their feelings is a fine Christian sentiment. I once read an autobiographical account of work on an African mission field in which the author, a woman, made the sad case that sexual misconduct is not unknown among people who serve the Lord as missionaries. Some of her tales were indeed shocking, but how much truth was there to her account? It did not claim to be factual in the ordinary sense. The author explained: "The story is true. However, in no way is the author attempting to bring unnecessary embarrassment to any individual, organization, or denomination. For this reason, the organizational names, the names of countries and cities, and the names of all persons except that of the author and her husband, have been changed unless otherwise indicated." [5]

The development of institutions adds substance and significance to an individual's story. Thus Stob's account of his life is at the same time a history of the college he served. My own life is also bound up significantly with such an institution -- even more so in my case, since I was involved in its founding, was the first employee, made the very first contacts with the Government of Ontario and also with some of the universities in the province, and so forth. Thus I would have some important matters to write about in memoirs, and I could certainly tell some interesting tales. But I would feel constrained by the confidentiality rule.

In politics this rule is more and more being cast aside. There is a price to pay, namely, that we get less effective government when those who occupy the key offices must live in the awareness that virtually everything they do and say will be reported to the public before long. I believe it is in the best interest of Redeemer College that some of the things I know about the college's history from personal experience remain secret; evidently, Stob felt the same way about Calvin College.

Loving our enemies. A third factor in narrative restraint is the Biblical injunction to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35). Since a story usually involves conflict, an author winds up writing about his enemies, whom he must love. How is this to be done? By not speaking ill of them? That would be one approach to consider.

Mrs. Grada Lieverdink is a Christian lady of Reformed persuasion who lived under Nazi occupation in the Netherlands during World War II. Later she settled in eastern Canada and told the story of her own life in two volumes entitled *The Open Door* (1985) and *A New Beginning* (1988). Now, one way to love your enemy would be to avoid embarrassing him by making his misdeeds known. For purposes of telling her story, Mrs. Lieverdink changed her own name (and presumably all others) and included in both books an intriguing disclaimer: "Although this book is based on actual facts, the names and descriptions of the characters are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental." She is so nice that she can hardly bring herself to speak ill of the Nazis, whom she refers to as "the enemy."

Stob is not quite so restrained as Mrs. Lieverdink, although he does not have much to say about the Nazis either. It happens that he was studying in Germany for his doctorate when Hitler was in power in the 1930s, but Stob reports that things were fairly peaceful in Göttingen, where he was studying. For his relatively brief comments on Nazism as he observed it first hand, see pp. 182-4.

Now, there is one conflict on which Stob does report in a way that can be called frank. He was not directly involved in it, but it did lead to his appointment to a professorship at Calvin Seminary. The conflict in question was a battle between professors in the seminary, a battle that took place over a period of about two years, during which Stob was serving in the college right next door.

I will not summarize the issues at stake in this battle; suffice it to say that the Christian Reformed synod of 1952 brought the struggle to an end by dismissing four professors. This battle represents a significant, albeit sad, chapter in Christian Reformed history, and it deserves a fuller airing than Stob gives it. (For his comments on the struggle, see pp. 288ff.) But once again, the confidentiality rule would have to be reckoned with.

Contested appointments. Philosophy was also contentious subject matter. For one thing, a certain William Harry Jellema taught philosophy to the young Henry Stob when the latter was a student at Calvin, but this Jellema was thought by some members of the support community not to be properly Reformed in his thinking. Stob does not give us many details, saying simply that Jellema "was in disfavor with some members of the faculty and board" (p. 135). In 1935 Jellema departed Calvin under something of a cloud and took a professorship at Indiana University. It was this move that opened up the Calvin professorship for Stob, who was appointed to take Jellema's place on a permanent basis. (Jesse De Boer, then not yet finished with his own graduate studies, filled in for some years before Stob returned from Europe.)

After the second world war, when the college grew rapidly and could consider expanding its philosophy department, Jellema was invited to return to Calvin as philosophy professor. This move, too, was a rather delicate matter (see pp. 263-6). Stob supported this decision and renders his own judgment on Jellema in the following words: "There were those who retained a memory of his alleged humanistic tendencies and his supposed bent toward Anglo-Hegelianism. Although I shared with those people a concern for a philosophy consonant with biblical verities, and although I was aware of Jellema's earlier inclination toward a brand of Christian Idealism, I did not doubt that at bottom his views were shaped by Reformed principles and that his strong desire was to bring all thought in subjection to Christ." [pp. 263-4]

Another point of philosophical disagreement in the Calvin College community was the potential value of the Christian philosophy being developed in Amsterdam by Herman Dooyeweerd and D.H.T. Vollenhoven. Stob tells us that Jellema disliked this new Dutch philosophy, even though it had some support on the board. When Stob was appointed to take Jellema's place, he was

in the process of finishing his own doctoral studies in Germany, but the board instructed him to take some post-doctoral study at the Free University of Amsterdam, where he could get a first-hand exposure to the new Christian philosophy (p. 167). This Stob proceeded to do, but without much enthusiasm. He was not impressed by the teaching of the Amsterdam philosophers (see p. 191). The specter of warfare in Europe (the year was 1939) was also a factor in Stob's reluctance to dig deeply in the Amsterdam soil.

Stob's lack of enthusiasm did not carry over to the Calvin board, which still wanted to see the new Christian philosophy represented on the Calvin campus. When the growth of the college made it possible to expand the philosophy department again, the board added a name to the slate of candidates under consideration -- H. Evan Runner, who did his doctoral work in philosophy under Vollenhoven at the Free University. The board got its way and Runner was appointed. Stob records that some efforts had already been made by the Calvin faculty during the war years to learn something of the new Christian philosophy being developed in Amsterdam. After Runner's coming, the anti-Amsterdam feeling on the part of some seems to have grown, and Stob appears to have cooled off even more in terms of appreciation for Dooyeweerd's thinking.

Those who are close to Calvin College have known for many years that relations between Runner, on the one hand, and Jellema and Stob, on the other, were far from cordial. Readers of Stob's memoirs might hope for fresh light on what was at issue, but Stob is rather restrained in his comments on Runner. The time line should also be borne in mind. Runner arrived in 1951, and in 1952 Stob was appointed to teach in the seminary. Thus Runner and Stob were full-time colleagues for only one year. Later on, they were more distant colleagues, since Stob was in the seminary, which was actually a separate institution. But Stob's book does not cover the many years during which he taught in the seminary. I would like to have read his comments on the Groen van Prinsterer Society (popularly known as the Groen Club), which Runner sponsored at the college as a rallying point for students who saw things his way. But such comments would have appeared in "Volume 2," covering the later years.

Now, Runner is another man who should write memoirs. I said this to him years ago, but I see no sign that it will happen. I have heard him tell many stories about how things used to be at Calvin College; many of those colorful stories have a rather different flavor than Stob's printed and carefully chosen words about Calvin's history. Some of things I have heard said are of such a nature that I would not like to see them in print; but there are some that do

belong in a book. I am not about to put them there; those who lived through the events must authorize their retelling in later decades. [6]

To this day there continues to be debate over the question whether the philosophy of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven is relevant for our colleges and whether it is still alive on the Calvin College campus. Another recent publication offers some interesting observations on this score. Styling itself "A History of Calvin College," a 27-page essay by James Bratt of Calvin's History Department carries the story into the 1970s, at which time, we are told, there was a resolution of the issue brought about by Nicholas Wolterstorff. Using now familiar categories such as "antitheticals" and "progressives," Bratt explains: "Ever since the early 1950s' battles between philosophers Evan Runner and Cornelius Van Til on the one hand and Harry Jellema and Henry Stob on the other, the Kuyperian cause had been divided -- sometimes with real animosity -- between the `antitheticals' and the `progressives.'" Wolterstorff reconciled the two sides, according to Bratt, but at a certain price, as far as the `antitheticals' were concerned: they gave up a good deal to win some acceptance. The result was that thereby Dooyeweerd was given a place of honor and also of abiding influence.

In defense of Bratt, it must be admitted that his presentation of this matter is brief -- not quite two pages. [7] Perhaps the brevity is part of the reason I do not find it convincing. Bratt's thesis concerning Christian philosophy in our colleges deserves a fuller elaboration. But as a footnote to the story of Henry Stob as a Christian thinker, it is well worth mentioning here.

Not an intellectual autobiography. Stob's reticence in relation to the items of philosophical conflict mentioned above has a certain cost, namely, that the book cannot be regarded as an intellectual autobiography. Although it has much to do with intellect and academe, the book does not explain how Stob came to think as he did.

I suspect not only that Stob planned a second volume or a much longer book but also that he intended to deal with his intellectual development in later chapters, against the background of his most substantial work, which was the teaching he did at Calvin Seminary. But the later chapters were never written. I'm disappointed in this regard, for the inclusion of such material would have made a fine book even finer. Nevertheless, I salute the late Professor Stob for taking the trouble to write such an account. --TP

NOTES

[1] Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, 354 pages, paperback.

[2] *In My Own Way: An Autobiography, 1915-1965* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 6, 21.

[3] New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991.

[4] *An Autobiography, or the Story of My Experiments with Truth*, tr. Mahadev Desai (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982; first published in 1927-29), p. 361.

[5] Dee Ann Miller, *How Little We Knew* (Lafayette, Louisiana: Prescott Press, 1993), see the Dedication.

[6] Runner does, however, have some autobiographical comments in print. See "Interview with Dr. H. Evan Runner," prepared by Harry Van Dyke and Albert M. Wolters, in *Hearing and Doing: Philosophical Essays Dedicated to H. Evan Runner*, ed. John Kraay and Anthony Tol (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979), pp. 333-61.

[7] Bratt's essay is entitled "Piety and Progress: A History of Calvin College." It appears in *Keeping Faith: Embracing the Tensions in Christian Higher Education*, ed. Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). See especially pp. 40-2.