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Personal History,
Adventures,
Experiences &
Observations of
Peter Leroy.*

THE BABBINGTON REVIEW

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Issue Number 17



My Prefaces Are Afterwords Now

by Peter Leroy

In the first thirty pages, said my father, turning over the leaves, and a little dry, as we are not closely connected with the subject; but the present will pass them off, in a prefatory introduction . . . or an introductory preface.

—Laurance Rives, *The Life and Opinions of Thomas Hardy*, Goodreads, Book 10, Chapter 1000

Spoiler alert: if you have never read George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* but think you might like to read it someday, you may not want to read what follows, choice. You've been warned.

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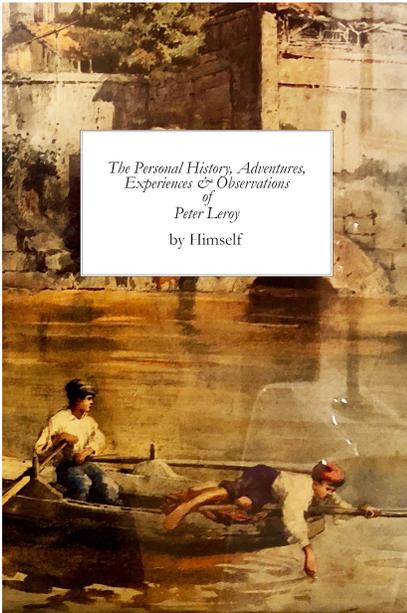
Ettore Roesler Franz, *Sbocco della Cloaca Massima* (detail)

All My Prefaces Are Afterwords Now

Peter Leroy

Spoiler alert: if you have never read George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* but think that you might like to read it someday, you may not want to read what follows. Your choice. You've been warned.

I arrived at college lean, green, and expecting to become a marine biologist, specializing in molluscs. I would have been happy, I thought then, taking nothing but marine biology courses for my full four years. However, Hargrove, fair Hargrove, had other ideas. I would have to “distribute” my courses and my attention into areas beyond molluscs and their world, even to the extent of taking courses in the humanities. I was intimidated by Hargrove, its lore, its aura, and its ivy, so I did as I was told. To begin meeting the distribution requirement, I took English 10, “Ripping Yarns.” The reading list included George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*.

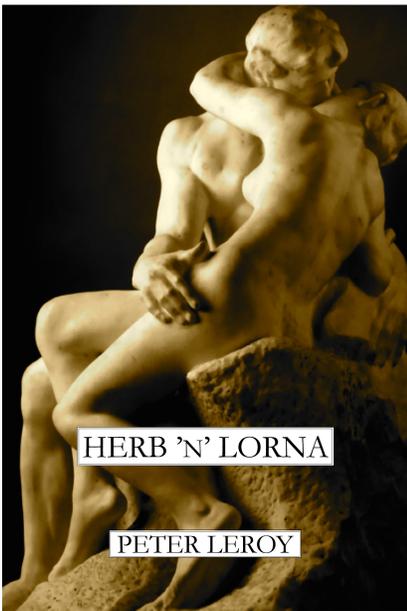


The Personal History, Adventures, Experiences & Observations of Peter Leroy by Himself



LITTLE FOLLIES

PETER LEROY



HERB 'N' LORNA

PETER LEROY

Determined not to let anything that might be on an exam slip past me, I began reading it at the very beginning, which, in the edition that we were required to read, was a half title or “bastard title,” followed by a series title page, the title page proper, the copyright page, and then an introduction by Gordon S. Haight, professor of English at Yale. Haight’s introduction began with these words: “The flood that ends *The Mill on the Floss* was not an afterthought to extricate the author from an impossible situation, but the part of the story that George Eliot planned first.”

Well, thank you very much, Professor Haight! I was annoyed enough by what I’d now call Professor Haight’s spoiler to toss the book aside in favor of *Oysters and All About Them, Being a Complete History of the Titular Subject, Exhaustive on All Points of Necessary and Curious Information from the Earliest Writers to Those of the Present Time, with Numerous Additions, Facts, and Notes*, by John. R. Philpots, L.R.C.P & S. Edin., J.P. &c.

However, over time, the single sentence that had delivered Professor Haight’s prefatory spoiler came to have on my life and work an influence as profound and lasting as Philpots’s two chunky volumes.

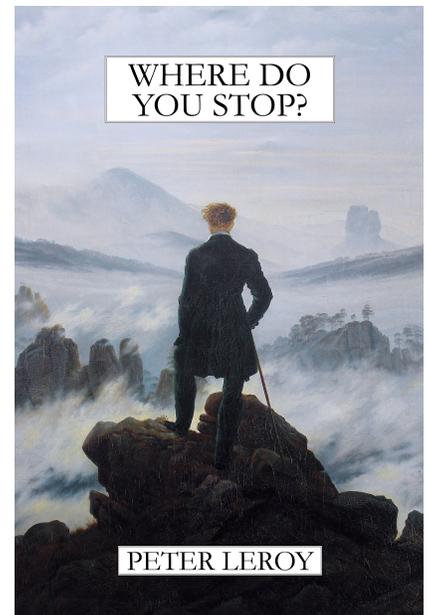
Inspired by, or in reaction against, Haight’s model, I wrote a preface for each of the nine very short books that launched my career in the memoir racket (later gathered in the single volume *Little Follies*), and I went on writing prefaces for each of the ten much longer volumes that followed. All my prefaces had spoilers, but my spoilers were different from Haight’s.

Why did I begin the books with prefaces? First, I wanted to confess to doing in the text that followed what all memoirists do but few are willing to admit to doing: straying from, twisting, embellishing, burnishing, exaggerating, or ignoring the facts. Usually, I gave an example or two, apparently spoiling my own effort,



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RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED



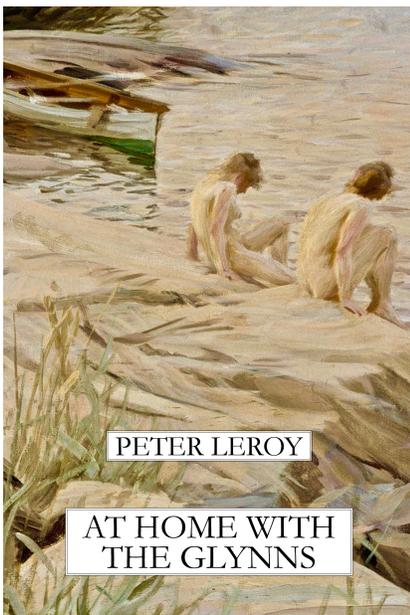
WHERE DO YOU STOP?

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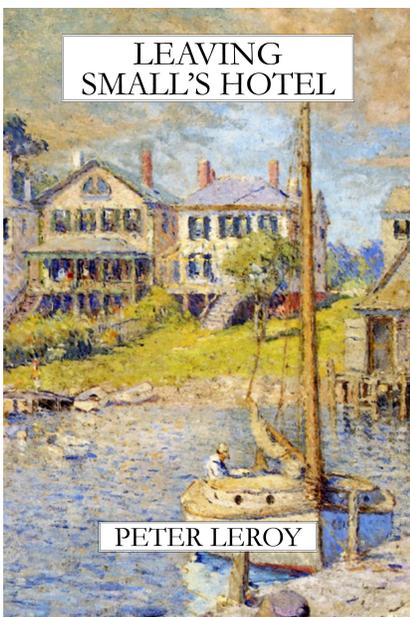


WHAT A PIECE OF WORK I AM

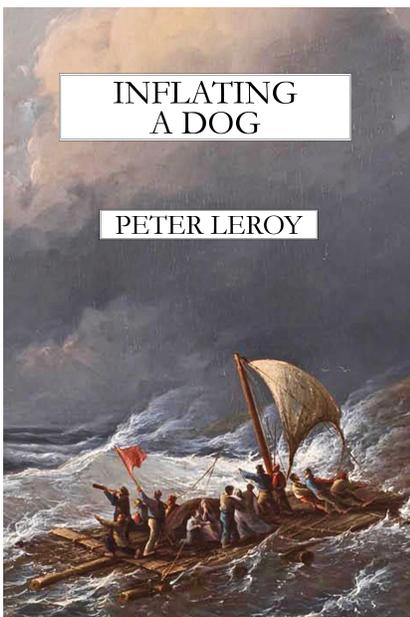
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AT HOME WITH
THE GLYNN'SLEAVING
SMALL'S HOTEL

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INFLATING
A DOG

PETER LEROY

later in the book, to paint a flattering portrait of myself and palm it off as true to life. Second, I wanted to give the reader a look into what went on during my writing of the memoir—my reasons for writing it, the ways in which my memory of the incidents in it might have been distorted by time and wishful thinking, and my reasons for altering the facts in the telling. Third, I wanted to set the reader up, to focus the reader's attention on aspects of the narrative that I considered particularly important and put the reader into a frame of mind conducive to appreciating those in the manner and to the degree that I wanted. Most of all, however, I wanted to invite the reader to read the book in the spirit in which I had written it, to join me in rambling through the narrative and through the life of the narrator during the time when he was writing it. I saw the prefaces as invitations to join me in a game. Though they were called prefaces, I didn't consider them *hors d'oeuvre*; I considered them essential.

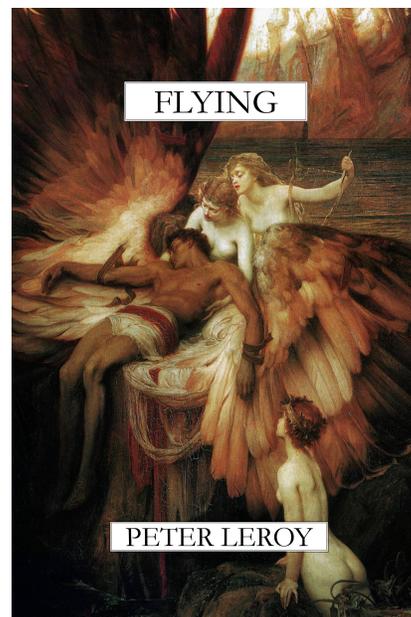
I think I had published nine of my books when I began to understand, through chance conversations with readers, that very many people were not reading the prefaces.

They did not read them before the text, as I'd intended, and they did not even return to them after they'd read the text. The readers had never given the prefaces a chance to have an effect on them.

What to do? The answer came from other writers. I began to notice that more and more writers, especially memoirists, were appending long acknowledgments sections to the text of their books. They were thanking everyone from their agents to their dentists. I asked a random sample of people browsing the bargain racks at my favorite bookstore whether they read these acknowledgments. Most of them did. "Why?" I asked. Nearly all of them said something along the lines of finding in these acknowledgments a glimpse into the

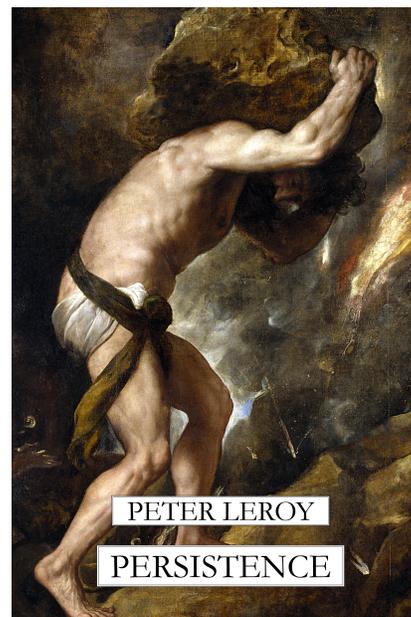


PETER LEROY

PASSIONATE
SPECTATOR

FLYING

PETER LEROY



PETER LEROY

PERSISTENCE



PETER LEROY

ALBERTINE'S
OVERCOAT

He was at . . . times more favourable to mankind than to think them blind to the beauties of his works, and imputed the slowness of their sale to other causes; either they were published at a time when . . . the attention of the public was engrossed by some . . . other object of general concern; or they were by the neglect of the publisher not diligently dispersed, or by his avarice not advertised with sufficient frequency.

Samuel Johnson, *An Account of the Life of Mr Richard Savage, Son of the Earl Rivers* (1744)

heart of the author, as if there at the back of the book, with the narrative over, the author relaxed, shed the mask of author, and spoke to the reader directly and frankly.

I understood what I had to do. If I wanted my prefaces read, I had to move them to the back of the book. They wouldn't work as acknowledgments, but I could turn them into afterwords. Would my publishers allow that? Would they pay for new editions of my slow-selling memoirs? I never had to find out whether they would or not, because in a remarkably short time every volume was out of print.

A defeat? No. An opportunity! Self-publishing had become easy and cheap, so I began re-issuing my work on my own. With the publication of this book, I have re-issued ten of the eleven volumes, each with an afterword rather than a preface.

I have just turned seventy-five. All my prefaces are afterwords now. There is a metaphor in there, I think.

Peter Leroy

Balham, "Gateway to the Bronx"

October 29, 2019

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The first thirty pages, said my father, turning over the leaves,—are a little dry; and as they are not closely connected with the subject,—for the present we'll pass them by: 'tis a prefatory introduction . . . or an introductory preface . . .

Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Book V, Chapter XXXI

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NOTHING BEATS
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BE THEY
EVER SO HUMBLE
OR
EVER SO GRAND