

From The Situation and the Story
by Vivian Gornick, Farrar, Straus and Giroux
N.Y.

trying to write; it was personal narrative. It would be 2002
years before I sat down at the desk with sufficient com-
mand of the distinction to control the material. That is, to
serve the situation and tell the kind of story I now wanted
to tell.

start
here

Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say. In *An American Tragedy* the situation is Dreiser's America; the story is the pathological nature of hunger for the world. In Edmund Gosse's memoir *Father and Son* the situation is fundamentalist England in the time of Darwin; the story is the betrayal of intimacy necessary to the act of becoming oneself. In a poem called "In the Waiting Room" Elizabeth Bishop describes herself at the age of seven, during the First World War, sitting in a dentist's office, turning the pages of *National Geographic*, listening to the muted cries of pain her timid aunt utters from within. That's the situation. The story is a child's first experience of isolation: her own, her aunt's, and that of the world.

Augustine's *Confessions* remains something of a model for the memoirist. In it, Augustine tells the tale of his conversion to Christianity. That's the situation. In this tale, he moves from an inchoate sense of being to a coherent sense

of being, from an idling existence to a purposeful one, from a state of ignorance to one of truth. That's the story. Inevitably, it's a story of self-discovery and self-definition.

The subject of autobiography is always self-definition, but it cannot be self-definition in the void. The memoirist, like the poet and the novelist, must engage with the world, because engagement makes experience, experience makes wisdom, and finally it's the wisdom—or rather the movement toward it—that counts. "Good writing has two characteristics," a gifted teacher of writing once said. "It's alive on the page and the reader is persuaded that the writer is on a voyage of discovery." The poet, the novelist, the memoirist—all must convince the reader they have some wisdom, and are writing as honestly as possible to arrive at what they know. To the bargain, the writer of personal narrative must also persuade the reader that the narrator is reliable. In fiction a narrator may be—and often famously is—unreliable (as in *The Good Soldier*, *The Great Gatsby*, Philip Roth's Zuckerman novels). In nonfiction, never. In nonfiction the reader must believe that the narrator is speaking truth. Invariably, of nonfiction it is asked, "Is this narrator trustworthy? Can I believe what he or she is telling me?"

How do nonfiction narrators make themselves trustworthy? A question perhaps best answered by example.

"In Moulmein, in Lower Burma," George Orwell writes in "Shooting an Elephant," "I was hated by large numbers of people—the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me. I was

sub-divisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty kind of way anti-European feeling was very bitter. No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress. As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so. When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. This happened more than once. In the end the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves. The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all. There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans.

“All this was perplexing and upsetting. For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better. Theoretically—and secretly, of course—I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos—all these oppressed me with an in-

tolerable sense of guilt. But I could get nothing into perspective. I was young and ill-educated and I had had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East. I did not even know that the British Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it. All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible. With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in *saecula saeculorum*, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty."

The man who speaks those sentences is the story being told: a civilized man made murderous by the situation he finds himself in. We believe this about him because the writing makes us believe it. Paragraph upon paragraph—composed in almost equal part of narration, commentary, and analysis—attests to a reflective nature now regarding its own angry passions with a visceral but contained distaste. The narrator records his rage, yet the writing is not enraged; the narrator hates Empire, yet his hate is not out of control; the narrator shrinks from the natives, yet his repulsion is tinged with compassion. At all times he is possessed of a sense of history, proportion, and paradox. In

short, a highly respectable intelligence confesses to having been *reduced* in a situation that would uncivilize anyone, including you the reader.

This man became the Orwell persona in countless books and essays: the involuntary truth speaker, the one who implicates himself not because he wants to but because he has no choice. He is the narrator created to demonstrate the dehumanizing effect of Empire on all within its reach, the one whose presence alone—"I am the man, I was there"—is an indictment.

It was politics that Orwell was after: the politics of his time. That was the situation into which he interjected this persona: the one who alone could tell the story he wanted told. Orwell himself—in unaesthetic actuality—was a man often at the mercy of his own mean insecurities. In life he could act and sound ugly: revisionist biographies now have him not only a sexist and an obsessed anti-communist but possibly an informer as well. Yet the persona he created in his nonfiction—an essence of democratic decency—was something genuine that he pulled from himself, and then shaped to his writer's purpose. *This* George Orwell is a wholly successful fusion of experience, perspective, and personality that is fully present on the page. Because he *is* so present, we feel that we know who is speaking. The ability to make us believe that we know who is speaking is the trustworthy narrator achieved.

From journalism to the essay to the memoir: the trip being taken by a nonfiction persona deepens, and turns ever more inward.

One of the most interesting memoirists of our time is another Englishman, J. R. Ackerley. When Ackerley died in 1967, at the age of seventy-one, he left behind a remarkable piece of confessional writing he had been working on for the better part of thirty years. It is, ostensibly, a tale of family life. He was the son of Roger Ackerley, a fruit merchant known most of his life as "the banana king." This father was a large, easygoing, generous man, at once expansive and kindly but indirect in his manner, most indirect. Ackerley himself grew up to become literary and homosexual, absorbed by his own interests and secrets, given to hiding his real life from the family. After his father's death in 1929 Ackerley learned that Roger had lived a double life. All the time the Ackerleys were growing up in middle-class comfort in Richmond, the father was keeping a second family on the other side of London: a mistress and three daughters. The disclosure of this "secret orchard," as the Victorian euphemism had it, astounded Joe Ackerley to such a degree that he became obsessed with probing deeper into the obscurity of his father's beginnings. In time he became convinced that in his youth Roger had also been a male whore and that it was through the love of a wealthy man that he had gained his original stake in life.

This is the story J. R. Ackerley set out to tell. Why did it take him thirty years to tell it? Why not three? Because what I've told you was not his story; it was his situation. It was the story that took thirty years to get itself told.

Ackerley was, he thought, only putting together a

puzzle of family life. All I have to do, he said to himself, is get the sequence right and the details correct and everything will fall into place. But nothing fell into place. After a while he thought, I'm not describing a presence, I'm describing an absence. This is the tale of an un-lived relationship. Who was he? Who was I? Why did we keep missing each other? After another while he realized, I always thought my father didn't want to know me. Now I see I didn't want to know him. And then he realized, It's not him I haven't wanted to know, it's myself.

My Father and Myself is little more than two hundred pages in length. Its prose is simple and lucid, wonderfully inviting from the first, now famous sentence, "I was born in 1896 and my parents were married in 1919." The voice that speaks that sentence will address with grace and candor whatever it is necessary to examine. From it will flow strong feeling and vivid intelligence, original phrasing and a remarkable directness. It's the directness that dazzles, coming as it does—and this is a minor miracle—from the exactly right distance: not too close, not too far. At this distance everyone and everything is made understandable, and therefore interesting. Because everyone and everything is interesting, we believe that the narrator is telling us all he knows.

Ackerley, as I have experienced him in writings *about* him, often seems nasty or pathetic; the Ackerley speaking here in *My Father and Myself* is a wholly engaging man, not because he sets out to be fashionably honest but because the reader feels him actively working to strip down

the anxiety till he can get to something hard and true beneath the smooth surface of sentimental self-regard. It took Ackerley thirty years to clarify the voice that could tell his story—thirty years to gain detachment, make an honest man of himself, become a trustworthy narrator. The years are etched in the writing. Incident by incident, paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, we have the glory of an achieved persona. Ackerley may not have the powers of a poet, but in *My Father and Myself* he certainly has the intent.

My trip to Egypt and the book that emerged from it now seem to me an embodiment of my own struggle to clarify, to release from anxiety the narrator who could serve the situation and find the story—a thing I was not then able to do. It was a time when my own psychological wishes were so mixed as to make it impossible for that instinct to be obeyed. I wanted at once both to clarify and to mystify. The compromised intent proved fatal. The problem was not detachment; the problem was I never knew who was telling the story. As a result, I never *had* a story. A dozen years after Egypt I set out to write a memoir about my mother, myself, and a woman who lived next door to us when I was a child. Here, for the first time, I struggled to isolate the story from the situation; here I taught myself what a persona is; and here I began to figure out what they all had to do with one another.

This story—the one about my mother, myself, and the woman next door—was based on an early insight I'd had that these two women between them had made me a

woman. Each had been widowed young, each had fallen into despair; one devoted the rest of her life to the worship of lost love, the other became the Whore of Babylon. No matter. In each case the lesson being taught was that a man was the most important thing in a woman's life. I hated the lesson from early on, had resolved to get out and leave both it and the women behind. I did get out, but as time went on I discovered that I couldn't leave any of it behind. Especially not the women. Most especially not my mother. I had determined to separate myself from her theatrical self-absorption, but now, as the years accumulated, I saw that my hot-tempered and cutting ways were, indeed, only another version of her needy dramatics. I saw further that for both of us the self-dramatization was a substitute for action: a piece of Chekhovian unresolve raging in me as well as her. It flashed on me that I could not leave my mother because I had become my mother.

This was the story I wanted to tell without sentiment or cynicism; the one I thought justified speaking hard truths. The flash of insight I'd had—that I could not leave my mother because I'd become my mother—was my wisdom: a tale of psychological embroilment I wanted badly to trace out.

To tell that tale, I soon discovered, I had to find the right tone of voice; the one I habitually lived with wouldn't do at all: it whined, it grated, it accused; above all, it accused. Then there was the matter of syntax: my own ordinary, everyday sentence—fragmented, interjecting, overriding—also wouldn't do; it had to be altered,

modified, brought under control. And then I could see, this as soon as I began writing, that I needed to pull back—*way* back—from these people and these events to find the place where the story could draw a deep breath and take its own measure. In short, a useful point of view, one that would permit greater freedom of association—for that of course is what I have been describing—had to be brought along. What I *didn't* see, and that for a long while, was that this point of view could only emerge from a narrator who was me and at the same time not me.

I began to correct for myself. The process was slow, painful, and, to my surprise, riddled with crippling self-doubt. I found a diary I had kept one summer ten years earlier; it contained information that I knew I could use. I opened the diary eagerly but soon turned away from it, stricken. The writing was soaked in a kind of girlish self-pity—"alone again!"—that I found odious. More than odious, threatening. As I read on, I felt myself being sucked back into its atmosphere, unable to hold on to the speaking voice I was working hard to develop. I threw the diary down in a panic, then felt confused and defeated. A few days later I tried again, but again felt myself going under. At last, I put it away.

One day—when I had been looking over an accumulation of pages possessed of what seemed to me the sufficiently right tone, syntax, and perspective—I opened the diary again, read in it a bit, laughed, got interested, even absorbed, and within minutes was making notes. With relief I thought, I'm not losing myself. Suddenly I realized

there was no myself to lose. I had a narrator on the page strong enough to do battle for me. The narrator was the me who could not leave her mother because she had become her mother. She was not intimidated by "alone again." Nor, come to think of it, was she much influenced by the me who was a walker in the city, or a divorced middle-aged feminist, or a financially insecure writer. She was, apparently, only her solid, limited self—and she was in control. I saw what I had done: I had created a persona.

Devotion to this narrator—this persona—became, while I was writing the book, an absorption that in time went unequalled. I longed each day to meet up again with her, this other one telling the story that I alone—in my everyday person—would not have been able to tell. I could hardly believe my luck in having found her (that's what it felt like, luck). It was not only that I admired her style, her generosity, her detachment—such a respite from the me that was me!—she had become the instrument of my illumination.

Later, reading and re-reading Edmund Gosse, Geoffrey Wolff, Joan Didion, I went into a trance of recognition from which I don't think I ever emerged. I could see that their writing was "about" something in very much the same way that mine was. In each case the writer was possessed of an insight that organized the writing, and in each case a persona had been created to serve the insight. I became enraptured, tracing out the development of the persona in memoir after essay after memoir (it was out of this rapture that I realized I was a nonfiction writer). I be-

gan to read the greats in essay writing—and it wasn't their confessing voices I was responding to, it was their truth-speaking personae. By which I mean that organic wholeness of being in a narrator that the reader experiences as reliable; the one we can trust will take us on a journey, make the piece arrive, bring us out into a clearing where the sense of things is larger than it was before.

Living as I now did with the idea of the nonfiction persona, I began to think better than I had before about the commonplace need, alive in all of us, to make large sense of things in the very moment, even as experience is overtaking us. Everywhere I turned in those days, I found an excuse for the observation that we pull from ourselves the narrator who will shape better than we alone can the inchoate flow of event into which we are continually being plunged. I remember once my then husband and I, and a friend of ours, went on a rafting trip down the Rio Grande. The river was hot and wild; sad, brilliant, remote; closed in by canyon walls, desert banks, snakes, and flash floods; on one side Texas, the other Mexico: a week after we'd been there, snipers on the Mexico side killed two people also floating on a raft. Later, we each wrote about the trip. My husband focused brightly on the "river rats" who were our guides, our friend soberly on the misery of illegal immigration, I morbidly on what strangers my husband and I had become. Reading these pieces side by side was in itself an experience. We had all used the river, the heat, the remoteness to frame our stories. Beyond that, how alone each of us had been, sitting there side by side

on that raft, carving out of our separating anxieties the narrator who, in the midst of all that beauty and oppressiveness, would keep us company—and tell us what we were living through.

I began to see that in the course of daily life when, by my own lights, I act badly—confrontational, challenging, dismissive—I am out there on that raft before I have found the narrator who can bring under control the rushing onslaught of my own internal flux. When I am doing better, I am able to see that the flux is a situation. I stop churning around inside my own defensiveness; adopt a tone, a syntax, a perspective not wholly mine that allows me to focus on . . . what? the husband? the guides? the illegals? No matter. Any one of them will do. I become interested then in my own existence only as a means of penetrating the situation in hand. I have created a persona who can find the story riding the tide that I, in my unmediated state, am otherwise going to drown in.

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It had been my intention when I began this book to provide an overview of nonfiction writing, but I very quickly saw that this was a task beyond my powers. The presence in a memoir or an essay of the truth speaker—the narrator that a writer pulls out of his or her own agitated and boring self to organize a piece of experience—it was about this alone that I felt I had something to say; and it was to those works in which such a narrator