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Reflection and Retrospection:
A Pedagogic Mystery Story

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In writing memoir, the trick, it seems to me, is to establish a double perspective, which will allow the reader to participate vicariously in the experience as it was lived (the confusions and misapprehensions of the child one was, say), while conveying the sophisticated wisdom of one's current self. This second perspective, the author's retrospective employment of a more mature intelligence to interpret the past, is not merely an obligation but a privilege, an opportunity. In any autobiographical narrative, whether memoir or personal essay, the heart of the matter often shines through those passages where the writer analyzes the meaning of his or her experience. The quality of thinking, the depth of insight, and the willingness to wrest as much understanding as the writer is humanly capable of arriving at—these are guarantees to the reader that a particular author's sensibility is trustworthy and simpatico. With me, it goes further: I have always been deeply attracted to just those passages where the writing takes an analytical, interpretative turn, and which seem to me the dessert, the reward of prose.

So it startled me when I began to discover among my writing students a fierce reluctance to allow their current, mature reflections to percolate through accounts of past experiences. When I say "writing students" I don't mean only undergraduates, but graduate MFA candidates in creative non-fiction, who had dedicated themselves, at great fiscal expense and personal sacrifice, to the lifelong practice and, often, teaching of literature. Many already possessed admirable stores of technique, talent, and ability to engage the reader, and I liked them as people; so I was dismayed, I'll admit, when I found these students resistant to the activity of retrospective thinking on the page. I had to guard against taking it personally, as a rejection of my own innermost literary sensibility, or as an omen betokening one of those

“generational cultural divides” that threaten to plunge middle-aged professors into morose speculations that it is time to hang it up. Since most of my students seemed to return my liking, and to be disposed to learn from me, I decided to regard this particular reluctance impersonally, as a curious phenomenon that I needed to understand better.

Over the course of the semester, many of them came around to what I was pitching, and developed a greater fluency in handling the double perspective. The only way to demonstrate this would be to compare their compositions from the beginning of the term to the end—trust me, it happened. Whether this change was merely a temporary one, to please their professor, or a permanent shift, I have no way of knowing. What interests me here is not to show how some pedagogic method worked in unblocking their resistance, but to analyze the reasons for that resistance in the first place. I hope by doing so to reveal something about the current practice of creative writing instruction, as well as the changing nature of the memoir, and perhaps the difficulty of thinking itself.

My students wanted to “walk” the reader through their experiences as they happened or, I should say, as they relived them in memory. In the early, rough-draft stages, there are few things more pleasurable than bringing up a memory and transcribing it directly, like a wide-awake dream. Some got no further than accumulating these verbal snapshots and never did hit upon an overseeing narrative voice to provide the necessary connective glue or thematic context. But this is what they liked to do, transcribe memories as they came, without (as they said) “clogging up the narrative” with hindsight. To me, it was not a clogging-up but an essential counter-narrative: that is, one strand reported on what happened, and another, equally important, speculated on the meaning of those events, through the ongoing dialectic between their prior and present intelligences. But it was interesting in itself that they saw such commentary as merely an interruption of the action.

This commentating knack is particularly valuable in the set-up, in which the memoirist ought to tell us what year the story is beginning, how old he or she was at the time, where the episode was taking place geographically, and something of the protagonist’s family background, class, religion, and dominant mental state at the time. This crucial information is precisely what the fledgling memoirist or personal essayist often leaves out—ostensibly because omitting it will make the story more universal (the opposite is true: omitting it will leave the reader frustrated and disoriented). Probably one reason for the omission is that the fledgling nonfiction writer

does not know how to insert such information gracefully, and so takes an active dislike to summaries. True, we have all encountered summaries that can be deadly: the obligatory rehash of facts and ideas, or the cursory condensation of years. The problem is not with summaries per se but with badly written ones. The student memoirist must be challenged to bring the most lively, idiosyncratic style to bear on these summarizing, "telling" passages, so that they will flow with personality, brio, and active reflection.

Consistently, students who have taken many workshops, only to land in mine, will point to just the interpretative, analytical moment in a fellow student's work as the offending passage, and assert that they could have intuited the same idea from the actions and dialogue scenes, without its having to be baldly stated. This I doubt, by the way; but they have been taught to pounce on reflective prose as foreign matter. Even if it were the case that they could have intuited the same insight strictly from scenes, I still would want to encourage emerging writers to put into words what they think about an experience being retold.

The nonfiction student's reluctance to provide summary and analysis shows the markings of that nefarious taboo of writing programs everywhere: "Show, Don't Tell." Leaving aside how much this simplistic precept has validity even in fiction (consider the strong essayistic tendency in novelists from Fielding, George Eliot, Balzac, Tolstoy down to Proust, Mann, Musil, and Kundera), I would argue that literary nonfiction is surely the one arena in which it is permissible to "tell." In personal essays and memoirs, we must rely on the subjective voice of the first-person narrator to guide us, and if that voice can never explain, summarize, interpret, or provide a larger sociological or historical context for the material, we are in big trouble. We are reduced to groping in a dark tunnel, able to see only two feet in front of us. (The current fashion for present tense helps writing students sustain the illusion that they are still in the dreamy trance-state that a recalled memory resembles, even as it destroys the possibility of judging its meaning through hindsight.) Now, I don't deny it can be exciting to grope myopically in the dark, for a while; but any autobiographical narrative of extended length may need to vary its handling of time; to alternate here-and-now moments with synoptic ones.

The objection voiced most frequently to my urging a double perspective on memoir-writers is: "But I didn't know any of that then!" My students seemed to feel they would be lying, or giving themselves too much credit, if their narrators were to assert more understanding on the page than their

protagonists actually possessed at that period of their lives. I quickly countered with just the sort of literary argument you might expect: that their narrator and their protagonist were two different creatures, and therefore the narrator *would* know things the I-character didn't; that all of nonfiction is an imaginative shaping of facts into a pointed narrative, and distorts or lies by being highly selective, its object being to attain a sense of literary, not literal, truth. . . . No dice. They had probably heard it a dozen times already; but the kinds of students drawn to creative nonfiction usually retain a taste for the unadulterated truth, and a naïve hope that here at last they will not have to lie, so that when you tell them "art is a lie" or some such cleverness, they look at you with these large disappointed eyes.

Beyond that, they seemed convinced that the "suspense" in their autobiographical narratives would be ruined if the insights in their protagonist's quest for self-knowledge were leaked to the reader too early in the game. Students love to justify vagueness in their writing by saying they don't want to give away the mystery. I tried reassuring them that there would still be no end of opportunities for suspense in the manipulation of narrative elements. They would be exchanging one mystery for another. As in any story that begins at the end (*The Death of Ivan Ilych*, say, or *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*), the reader may know what is going to happen, but not how. Besides, in autobiographical nonfiction, it is more important for the reader to be apprised of the larger facts of a case from the start, and then be led through the suspenseful unraveling of what the writer makes of these facts—more important for the reader to develop trust in a worldly, confiding, forcefully eloquent narrative voice from the start, than to be placed in the fumbling hands of a naïve. The real danger was to leave the reader feeling cheated by the writer's withholding of key information. Of course, all literary narratives involve deferring *some* information to a later point, when it will have been set up to derive maximum effect; but, just as mystery writers must obey certain unspoken rules about how long to suppress evidence, so the diplomacy of the memoirist is in knowing which facts can be happily deferred and which will cause the reader to holler "Foul!"

For example, I had a student who was writing a memoir about living with a multiple personality disorder (MPD). She claimed that because she had only been diagnosed as such in her late twenties, she did not want to "kill the suspense" by letting the reader in on the secret before that moment when it would occur chronologically to her protagonist in the narrative—roughly two hundred pages in. And so, she had planned to write a series of narrative vignettes that would show her youthful protagonist act-

ing in bafflingly various ways, à la *Three Faces of Eve*, and then provide the diagnostic key, aha! In this way, she hoped to “put” the reader through her own experience. I begged her not to do this. Should the book ever find a publisher, I argued, the marketing would give the secret away anyhow. Instead, I suggested she write an introduction that would explain straightforwardly what MPD was, admit that she had it, and then, at every step of the way, let her narrator offer as much insight as she could about the experiences she had undergone, and how she regards that younger self now.

To her and the others, I issued my challenge: “I cannot wait until page 200 for the intelligent narrator to arrive! The intelligent narrator must be present from page 1 onward!”

I also gave the example of the student writer who is erroneously criticized in workshop for using words that his seven- or nine-year-old protagonist wouldn't have known. This common, if primitive, misunderstanding would have it that stories or memoirs from inside a child's head must adhere to the age-appropriate developmental vocabulary and syntax. The truth is that readers easily accept the convention of a child-narrator using adult vocabulary; even semicolons. It would be tedious indeed were we forced to read a long story told in the five-hundred-word vocabulary and subject-verb-object sentence structure possessed by a seven-year-old. What is important, in writing about childhood, is to convey the psychological outlook you had as a child, not your limited verbal range.

When did the protagonist figure out what she figured out, and when is her narrator going to tell us? This became the personal nonfiction workshop's central question. One of the workshop students actually took the trouble to verify what I was saying: He went to the library, pulled out a dozen highly regarded American memoirs from Benjamin Franklin to Lucy Grealy, read the first few pages, and found that they had all employed a double perspective, making use of intellectual hindsight. I was grateful that he had not taken my word for it.

Some students were already willing to concede my point, but expressed uncertainty that they could pull it off. When you ask writing students to keep reflecting about the meaning of the experiences they are recounting, they look panicked: “You want me to think *on every page*? Easy for you to do, but not us.” They gravely doubt that they can produce reflective language. Part of my job is to try to convince them that they already have these thoughts in them. They are constantly taking the measure of the distance between their prior and present selves.

Some of this resistance to retrospection may be rooted in past instruction. Early on in my own writing career, I was taught to sneer, as at something impossibly old-fashioned and Victorian, at the locution “What I did not know then, but would learn at a later date . . .” We were discouraged from letting our narrator “peek ahead,” since this semi-omniscient device, like the address to the reader, might bring excessive attention to the authorial apparatus and “take the reader out of the story.” Postmodernism has since lessened the strictures against displaying authorial self-consciousness in a text, but remnants of that old bias against looking forward or back persist. I wonder why, since there are few mental acts in life more common or natural than retrospection.

My students whimpered that they could not imagine pulling it off in their own writing; it was hard to do. Granted, it may seem difficult at first to modulate on the page between one’s older and present consciousness, to direct the mental traffic of a divided self. Taking pity on my students, I reassured them that there are other ways, beside reflective commentary, by which they might insinuate authorial intelligence. They could also tweak the tone—for instance, by employing a large, formal vocabulary and ornate syntax while telling a story inside a child’s head, or by using irony to let the reader in on the truth, even when the protagonist doesn’t see it. The narrator might say, “I was outraged that my inconsiderate mama wouldn’t buy me every Barbie in the store.” Thackeray employs such irony often in *Vanity Fair*, while taking us into Becky Sharp’s conniving mind.

They were cheered at the prospect of specific “techniques” they might learn, that could get them off the hook of having to think directly on the page. Students are always happy to grasp at techniques, just as I am often unhappy to give them out. I find myself at such times in the position of a psychotherapist, waiting for an analysand to commit to the painful work of self-awareness and change, without shortcuts.

If students showed willingness to use indirect methods to insinuate more worldly perceptions, I still wondered why they were so reluctant to state, from their current intellectual grasp, what they made of their younger selves. They reverted to the objection that it would be a falsification of their earlier capacity to understand, whereas I saw it as much more honest, because it better approximated their mental outlook now—which was, after all, their actual situation when writing. Could it be, I wondered, that they had a narcissistic attachment to that ignorant younger self, so fragile, so guileless, and wanted to protect it from the contamination of intellectual sophistication?

I often tell my students literary nonfiction is one art that has no use for naiveté: there are no primitives, no Grandma Moses of the essay. This limitation causes me no pain since, growing up, I was in a hurry to lose my innocence and achieve a disenchanting, worldly wisdom as fast as possible. I sense, however, that many of my students value innocence more highly than I do: they often write what are, to me, sentimental essays about wishing they were kids again, watching Saturday morning cartoons, free of adult cares and responsibilities. So my eagerness to have them develop the most adult, self-aware, intellectually ambitious voice on the page has to contend against their feeling that idealism and sweet-naturedness are bound up with a lack of acuity. I am thus asking them to be “cynical,” to bite the apple from the tree of knowledge. All literature professors are, to some extent, in this same situation of trying to awaken their charges from a sentimental optimism about life to the recognition of reality as a more tragically complex business, through the study of great texts. We become the bringers of bad news, connoisseurs of “downers,” and must seem sadistic at times in that respect.

What must be remembered, however, is that pure innocence is a fiction, as Freud taught us. Moreover, every person, no matter how young, is inhabited by coexisting developmental layers: nine-year-olds have moments of precocious cognition and startlingly shrewd insight into people around them, and teenagers, when not being utterly, stereotypically adolescent, find within themselves shards of their 40-year-old mothers’ weary understanding, alongside fragments of their doll-playing, six-year-old selves.

Students also argued against retrospective reflection by saying that it would take away from a piece’s “vulnerability.” They granted my criticism, in one case, that the writer lacked emotional clarity and was still in the resentful throes of a recent wounding experience (being jilted), but they thought this vulnerable rawness made the piece more interesting. Whatever my own classical, Apollonian predispositions are, I registered the class’s sharp valuing of emotion over intellect, and their suspicion of intelligence itself as icy, soul-destroying. They seemed to consider emotional restraint unhealthy per se: repressive, ulcer-causing. Students often want to write from and about their feelings. The problem with writing about feelings is that when you are immersed in a feeling, the analytical intelligence disappears, along with the context, and the I-character becomes generic. I tried to offer my conviction that emotion and thinking are not mutually exclusive but can coexist: passionately argued thought can have an affective warmth, just as feelings can be thoughtfully and delicately examined. I don’t know if they believed me or not, but I had to implant the idea.

In the students' defenses of raw feeling, I also wondered to what extent they were clinging to a "victim" role, by shutting out the voice of adult judgment. To reflect deeply on the wounds inflicted on oneself in the past might lead to an admission of complicity in that suffering. As Kafka advised: "In the struggle between yourself and the world, you must side with the world." But the impetus for many fledgling writers drawn to autobiographical narrative is the need to recite a tale of abuse. They persist in believing that they can claim the public's attention only if they spoke with the authority of a victimized outsider, as regards racial prejudice, gender bias, sexual abuse, physical disability, multiple personality disorder, unloving parents, and so on. While these existential particulars might be a promising jumping-off point for the generation of material, there is still the need on the memoirist's part to create a complex, flawed I-character and a satisfyingly self-aware narrator. I counsel against constructing a narrative around one's victimization—always being in the right, more sinned against than sinning—if for no other reason than that the self-righteous protagonist becomes repellent. "But what if one really *is* a victim?" demanded an elderly woman graduate student, whose second husband was a philandering louse. I replied that "victim" is partly a subjective status: there are compacts struck between cuckold and cuckold; there are people who overcome horrendous childhoods or bad breaks to become whole, productive human beings, while others, raised in relatively serene, loving households, sometimes turn into self-pitying, psychically maimed adults. We do have some choice in what we make of our trials, early and late.

Some of my students' resistance to retrospective analysis may have come partly from an unwillingness to relinquish their rage. Alongside technical advice, I was urging them, I suppose, to move from resentment and self-hate to self-amusement, or at least stoical realism. Not that I have any right to rearrange their psyches in this way, or the power to do so; but being a writing teacher is never merely a matter of teaching writing. I have hopes for my charges' psychological well-being that go beyond their ability to write clarifying prose. Still, the victim narrative has deep roots in our culture, and so there was no way to lop off its head once and for all: it kept returning.

Another fashionable narrative that I found myself having to do battle with, in order to coax my students into subtler narrations, was the Addiction Scenario. In this case, the prepackaged insights supplied by Alcoholics Anonymous and its twelve-step program tend to supplant the impromptu, unorthodox reflections that might have arisen in the writer's mind, and to close down prematurely skepticism and self-doubt. The mem-

oirist under the sway of the Addiction Scenario keeps corralling his or her material into the twelve steps, and the narrative is forced to follow a lock-step progression from darkness to light. In the first half, the addict is shown unaware and in denial; then the addict submits to the authority of the detox group, and the truth that emerges from that leads to illumination, sobriety, and faith. However helpful AA may be in coping with this terrible illness, as a model for belletristic memoir its template proves overly rigid. "Denial" is too crude an explanation for the way the mind works, in undulating, aqueous layers of awareness and repudiation of awareness. Humankind can bear very little reality, T. S. Eliot may have famously warned us; but what scraps of reality the mind does let in seem to circulate freely with the unreality bits, rather than getting shunted off to a Denial safe-deposit box.

The addict turns out to be another version of the innocent, protected from self-knowledge by the monster-substance that dominates the cerebral cortex. But it was a writing student wanting to hold onto her *guilt* who put up the fiercest struggle to my advocacy of the double perspective. L., a graduate student whose thesis I was directing, had been writing a memoir about her year of working on a Native American reservation. When she started the year, she thought she could make a difference in the kids' lives, but the "Rez" took it out of her, and she left convinced that it was hopeless, and guilty that she was abandoning the kids to a miserable life. After the experience was over, she started to gain some theoretical insight into how arrogant and "unconscious" she had been in her initial assumptions, how colonialist were her feelings of cultural superiority, and how much her disapproval of the adults' bad behavior on the reservation had been conditioned by her own family history of alcoholism and abandonment. Well and good. She wanted to tell the story in sequence, conveying her groping from ignorance to truth. The pages she produced were a fascinating *mélange* of powerful scenes and confusing, self-absorbed rants. When I pointed out that certain of her narrator's judgments about the characters (especially the men, starting with her father) seemed unbalanced or unfair, or that her protagonist seemed excessively clueless in many situations, she said she *meant it that way*. She wanted the reader to get a picture of her as an unconscious Lady Bountiful. She was working toward that moment of revelation when the character's limited insight and later hindsight would come together, in the last third of the book; and there were some things she wanted the reader to realize, through the narrative *pattern*, that the protagonist or the narrator might never realize. I said this was tantamount to using an unreliable narrator. She was fine with that. I repeated the by-now familiar directive that

we cannot wait until page 250 for the intelligent, worldly narrator to make an appearance. It seemed to me she was hanging her younger self out to dry, and not even allowing her narrator the dignity of clear thought, while operating on the dubious premise that the pattern would deliver these insights. This may be standard operating procedure for some fiction, but it is hardly common practice in memoirs, where we do need to trust that the narrator is leveling with us. I challenged her to come up with one example of a successful memoir in which the narrator was blinkered but the reader got it anyway. She couldn't. All the models she had been drawing on were, interestingly enough, novels; but she continued to insist that she be allowed to "experiment" in this way. Far be it from me to squash a literary experiment; she was welcome to pursue it, but I was not enthusiastic about her chances of success.

Though perhaps you may feel that she ought to have been applauded for attempting something so difficult, the problem was that I didn't think she had the chops to pull it off, and as her teacher I felt obliged to point out that she was making a much harder road for herself. Beyond that, I have to admit I was shocked that someone would so willfully and cavalierly discard what to me were the strengths of the memoir form. Granted, like all literary forms it is still evolving, and many elements coexist in several forms; but with L.'s thesis, it seemed to me, we had finally reached the dividing-line. There *are* a few hard differences between fiction and nonfiction, and, to my way of thinking, the intentional telling of one's past experience in the voice of an unreliable, because less-than-insightful, narrator was such a difference.

L.'s was not the only instance of this practice. I had another thesis student, M., who wrote a personal essay about his grandfather, in which the narrator sounded smugly contemptuous of his whole family and embarrassed by them, until the last page, when he suddenly had a revelation that they were the salt of the earth and he was a creep. M. thought he was doing something very hip, very "honest," by portraying himself as an asshole; but to me it was a disingenuous stunt on his part to suppress his larger self-awareness until the last page. He was not playing fair. He was creating an unreliable narrator to make sense of his past, and he was evading the harder task of convincing us that the narrator is trying as much as possible to get to the bottom of the matter at hand.

One of the profound changes to have affected serious writing in recent years has been the spread of fiction and poetry techniques into literary nonfiction: the "Show, Don't Tell" requirement, the emphasis on concrete sen-

the moment and ring true. There is nothing more exciting than following a live, candid mind thinking on the page, exploring uncharted waters.

In attempting any autobiographical prose, the writer knows what has happened—that is the great relief, one is given the story to begin with—but not necessarily what to make of it. It is like being handed a text in cuneiform: you have to translate, at first awkwardly, inexpertly, slowly, and uncertainly. To think on the page, retrospectively or otherwise, *is* difficult, in the last analysis. But the writer's struggle to master that which initially may appear too hard to do, that which only the dead and the great seem to have pulled off with ease, is moving in itself, and well worth undertaking. ■