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Intro to  
The Situation  
& the Story

**A** pioneering doctor died and a large number of people spoke at her memorial service. Repeatedly it was said by colleagues, patients, activists in health care reform that the doctor had been tough, humane, brilliant; stimulating and dominant; a stern teacher, a dynamite researcher, an astonishing listener. I sat among the silent mourners. Each speaker provoked in me a measure of thoughtfulness, sentiment, even regret, but only one among them—a doctor in her forties who had been trained by the dead woman—moved me to that melancholy evocation of world-and-self that makes a single person's death feel large. The speaker had not known the dead doctor any better or more intimately than the others; nor had she anything new to add to the collective portrait

we had already been given. Yet *her* words had deepened the atmosphere and penetrated my heart. Why? I wondered, even as I brushed away the tears. Why had *these* words made a difference?

The question must have lingered in me because the next morning I awakened to find myself sitting bolt upright in bed, the eulogy standing in the air before me like a composition. That was it, I realized. ~~It had been composed. That is what had made the difference.~~

The eulogist had been remembering herself as a young doctor coming under the formative influence of the older one. The memory had acted as an organizing principle that determined the structure of her remarks. Structure had imposed order. Order made the sentences more shapely. Shapeliness increased the expressiveness of the language. Expressiveness deepened association. At last, a dramatic buildup occurred, one that had layered into it the descriptive feel of a young person's apprenticeship, medical practices in a time of social change, and a divided attachment to a mentor who could bring herself only to correct, never to praise. ~~This buildup is called texture. It was the texture that had stirred me; caused me to feel with powerful immediacy, not only the actuality of the woman being remembered but—even more vividly—the presence of the one doing the remembering.~~ The speaker's effort to recall with exactness how things had been between herself and the dead woman—her open need to make sense of a strong but vexing relationship—had caused her to say so much that I became aware at last of

all that was *not* being said; that which could never be said. I felt acutely the warm, painful inadequacy of human relations. This feeling resonated in me. It was the resonance that had lingered on, exactly as it does when the last page is turned of a book that reaches the heart.

The more I thought about the achieved quality of the eulogy, the more clearly I saw how central the eulogist herself had been to its effectiveness. The speaker had "composed" her thoughts the better to recall the apprentice she had once been, the one formed by that strong but vexing relationship. As she spoke, we could see her in her mentor's presence, sharply alive to the manner and appearance of a teacher at once profoundly intelligent and profoundly cutting. There she was, now eager, now flinching, now dug in. It was the act of imagining herself as she had once been that enriched her syntax and extended not only her images but the coherent flow of association that led directly into the task at hand.

The better the speaker imagined herself, the more vividly she brought the dead doctor to life. It was, after all, a baptism by fire that was being described. To see her ambitious young self burning to know what her mentor knew, we had to see the mentor as well: an agent of threat and promise: a figure of equal complexity. The volatility of their exchange brought us to the heart of the reminiscence. The older doctor had been as embroiled as the younger one in a struggle of will and temperament that had joined them at the hip. The story here was not either the speaker or the doctor per se; it was what happened to

each of them in the other's company. The place in which they met as talented belligerents was the one the eulogist had her eye on. It was *here* that she had engaged. This was what had supplied her her balanced center.

It was remarkable to me how excellent were relations between this narrator and this narration. The speaker never lost sight of why she was speaking—or, perhaps more important, of *who* was speaking. Of the various selves at her disposal (she was, after all, many people—a daughter, a lover, a bird-watcher, a New Yorker), she knew and didn't forget that the only proper self to invoke was the one that had been apprenticed. That was the self in whom this story resided. A self—now here was a curiosity—that never lost interest in its own animated existence at the same time that it lived only to eulogize the dead doctor. This last, I thought, was crucial: the element most responsible for the striking clarity of intent the eulogy had demonstrated. Because the narrator knew *who* was speaking, she always knew *why* she was speaking.

**T**he writing we call personal narrative is written by people who, in essence, are imagining only themselves: in relation to the subject in hand. The connection is an intimate one; in fact, it is critical. Out of the raw material of a writer's own undisguised being a narrator is fashioned whose existence on the page is integral to the tale being told. This narrator becomes a persona. Its tone of

voice, its angle of vision, the rhythm of its sentences, what it selects to observe and what to ignore are chosen to serve the subject; yet at the same time the way the narrator—or the persona—sees things is, to the largest degree, the thing being seen. ✂

To fashion a persona out of one's own undisguised self is no easy thing. A novel or a poem provides invented characters or speaking voices that act as surrogates for the writer. Into those surrogates will be poured all that the writer cannot address directly—inappropriate longings, defensive embarrassments, anti-social desires—but must address to achieve felt reality. The persona in a nonfiction narrative is an unsurrogated one. Here the writer must identify openly with those very same defenses and embarrassments that the novelist or the poet is once removed from. It's like lying down on the couch in public—and while a writer may be willing to do just that, it is a strategy that most often simply doesn't work. Think of how many years on the couch it takes to speak about oneself, but without all the whining and complaining, the self-hatred and the self-justification that make the analysis a bore to all the world but the analyst. The unsurrogated narrator has the monumental task of transforming low-level self-interest into the kind of detached empathy required of a piece of writing that is to be of value to the disinterested reader.

Yet the creation of such a persona is vital in an essay or a memoir. It is the instrument of illumination. Without it there is neither subject nor story. To achieve it, the writer

of memoir or essay undergoes an apprenticeship as soul-searching as any undergone by novelist or poet: the twin struggle to know not only why one is speaking but *who* is speaking.

The beauty of the eulogist's delivery had been the clarity of her intent. Working backward, we can figure out for ourselves how hard earned that clarity must have been. Invited to speak about an experience she had lived with for more than twenty years, the eulogist must have thought, A piece of cake, the story will write itself. Then she sat down to it, and very quickly discovered herself stymied. Well, what *about* the experience? What exactly was it? And where was it? The experience, it seemed, was a large piece of territory. How was she to enter it? From what angle, and in what position? With what strategy, and toward what end? The eulogist is flooded with confusion. She realizes suddenly that what she's been calling experience is only raw material.

Now she starts thinking. Who exactly *was* the doctor to her? Or she to the doctor? And what does it mean, having known her? What does she want this remembrance to exemplify? or embody? or invoke? What *is* it that she is really wanting to say? Questions not easy for a eulogist to ask much less answer, as many failed commemorations demonstrate, among them, famously, James Baldwin's of Richard Wright, in which a talented writer comes to honor his dead mentor and ends by trashing him because he can't figure out how to face his own mixed feelings.

Precisely the place to which our eulogist finally puzzles her way: her own mixed feelings. First she sees that she has them. Then she acknowledges them to herself. Then she considers them as a way into the experience. Then she realizes they *are* the experience. She begins to write.

Penetrating the familiar is by no means a given. On the contrary, it is hard, hard work.

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I began my own working life in the 1970s as a writer of what was then called personal journalism, a hybrid term meaning part personal essay, part social criticism. On the barricades for radical feminism, it had seemed natural to me from the minute I sat down at the typewriter to use myself—that is, to use my own response to a circumstance or an event—as a means of making some larger sense of things. At the time, of course, that was a shared instinct. Many other writers felt similarly compelled. The personal had become political, and the headlines metaphoric. We all felt implicated. We all felt that immediate experience signified. Wherever a writer looked, there was a narrative line to be drawn from the political tale being told on a march, at a party, during a chance encounter. Three who did it brilliantly during those years were Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, and Norman Mailer.

From the beginning I saw the dangers of this kind of writing, saw what remarkable focus it would take to maintain the right balance between me and the story. Personal journalism had already thrown up many examples of people rushing into print with no clear idea of the relation between narrator and subject; writers were repeatedly falling into the pit of confessionalism or therapy on the page or naked self-absorption.

I don't know how well or how consistently I practiced what I had begun to preach to myself, but invariably I took it as my task to keep the narrating self subordinated to the idea in hand. I knew that I was never to tell an anecdote, fashion a description, indulge in a speculation whose point turned on me. I was to use myself only to clarify the argument, develop the analysis, push the story forward. I thought my grasp of the situation accurate and my self-consciousness sufficient. The reliable reporter in me would guarantee the trustworthy narrator.

One day a book editor approached me with an idea that struck a note of response. I had confided in her the tale of an intimate friendship I'd made with an Egyptian whose childhood in Cairo had strongly resembled my own in the Bronx. The resemblance had induced an ardent curiosity about "them"; and now I was being invited to go to Egypt, to write about middle-class Cairenes.

I said yes with easy pleasure, assuming that I would do in Cairo what I had been doing in New York. That is, I'd put myself down in the middle of the city, meet the

people, turn them into encounters, use my own fears and prejudices to let them become themselves, and then I'd *make* something of it.

But Cairo was not New York, and personal journalism turned out not exactly the right job description.

The city was a bombardment of stimuli—dusty, crowded, noisy, alive and in pain—and the people—dark, nervous, intelligent; ignorant, volatile, needy; familiar, somehow very familiar—after all, how far from the idiom of excitable ghetto Jews was that of urban Muslims. The familiarity was my downfall. It excited and confused me. I fell in love with it and I romanticized it, made a mystery of the atmosphere and of myself in it. Who was I? Who were *they*? *Where* was I, and what was it all about? The problem was I didn't really want the answers to these questions. I found the "unknowingness" of things alluring. I thought it fine to lose myself in it. But when one makes a romance out of not knowing, the reliable reporter is in danger of becoming the untrustworthy narrator. And to a large degree she did.

I spent six hardworking months in Cairo. Morning, noon, and night I was out with Egyptians: doctors, housewives, journalists; students, lawyers, guides; friends, neighbors, lovers. It seemed to me that there was no more interesting thing in the world to do than to hang out with these people who smoked passionately, spoke with intensity, were easily agitated, and seemed consumed with a nervous tenderness applied to themselves and to one an-

other. I thought their condition profound, and I identified with it. Instead of analyzing my subject, I merged with my subject. The Egyptians loved their own anxiety, thought it made them poetic. I got right into it, loving and dramatizing it as much as they did. Anecdote after anecdote collected in my notes, each one easily suffused with the fever of daily life in Cairo. Merely to reproduce it, I thought, would be to tell a story.

Such identification in writing has its uses and its difficulties, and in my book on Egypt the narration reflects both. On the one hand, the prose is an amazement of energy, crowded with description and response. On the other, the sentences are often rhetorical, the tone ejaculatory, the syntax overloaded. Where one adjective will do, three are sure to appear. Where quiet would be useful, agitation fills the page. Egypt was a country of indiscriminate expressiveness overflowing its own margins. My book does this curious thing: it mimics Egypt itself. That is its strength and its limitation.

It seemed to me for a long time that the problem had been detachment: I hadn't had any, hadn't even known it was a thing to be prized; that, in fact, without detachment there can be no story; description and response, yes, but no story. Even so, the confusion went deeper. When I had been a working journalist, politics had provided me with a situation, and polemics had given me my story. Now, in Egypt, I was in free fall, confused by a kind of writing whose requirements I did not understand but whose power I felt jerked around by. It wasn't personal journalism I was

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

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 unlived 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 unequaled. 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.

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

comes through strong and clear that I was invariably drawn.

The more I have read of memoir and essay, the more easily I have seen how long a history it has, this nonfiction persona, and how great is its capacity for adaptation to cultural change. As the last century wore on, the idea of "becoming oneself" altered—in literature as in life—almost beyond recognition. But whether that self is posited as whole or fragmented, real or alien, intimate or strange, the nonfiction persona—like the persona in novels and poems—has kept re-inventing itself with a strength and resourcefulness that are really quite remarkable. Whatever the story has been, as we approached the millennium, there's been a situation to contain it and a truth speaker to interpret it.

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