

The **SITUATION**

the Art of Personal Narrative

and the **STORY**

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VIVIAN GORNICK

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The **SITUATION**
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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.



The 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.

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