

Narrative Reflection: The Essential Route to Understanding

Narrative reflection in essay is truth telling by the narrator using perspective or perspectives through which the story is related. Narrative reflection has often been referred to as the narrator interior or inner voice. It is the meditative element, the musing, the mature voice reflecting on — and making sense of — the events of the past. Narrative reflection is also a vehicle of intimacy — between the writer and her experience as well as between reader and writer. Joshua Landy, a professor of comparative literature at Stanford has remarked that “the role of the narrator influences the type of relationship we have not only with him or her, but also with the story.” When we read a personal essay authentically told — including moments where we observe, up close, how the narrator is thinking — we feel we have a relationship with the writer; we acquire a personal stake in the meaning. Psychologists widely agree that trust and communication are the lifeblood of healthy relationships. As in relationships, on the page, essayists share when we acknowledge our feelings, lean in to uncomfortable questions, confront what agitates us. Noted life strategist Tony Robbins has written that the human experience is one in motion. So, too, is the author and readers’ relationship in essay, advancing and evolving on the journey of narrative reflection.

So what of this journey? Essayist and teacher Patricia Hampl once said of her own writing: “It still comes as a shock to realize that I don’t write about what I know; I write in order to find out what I know.” (Hampl, Patricia. *Memory and Imagination, The Fourth Genre, Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*, 2012, Pearson Education, p. 267)

Whereas writers of fiction or screenplay know how their story ends, in memoir and personal essay, the end can be described as, if not a mystery, then the provisional end point of a potentially circuitous journey. Novelist Joyce Carol Oates argued, presumably about fiction, “the first sentence can’t be written until the final sentence is written.” Essayists might beg to differ. We may not know how our story ends. Of course we have the facts, or most of them. But in essay we are looking for more. Vivian Gornick in her seminal work, *The Situation and the Story*, contends that in essay it is not the truth that matters, but the meaning we make of it. Sense making, after all, seems to be the point of the essay. About the writer and narrator’s role in this genre, Gornick observes:

“We are in the presence... of a mind puzzling its way out of its own shadows — moving from unearned certainty to thoughtful reconsideration to clarified self-knowledge.” (Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 1st edition, October 11, 2002, p. 36)

What Do We Know?

Scott Russell Sanders remarks on the psychological, almost anthropological, basis of reflection in the essay genre he affectionately refers to as a “quirky and inquisitive” form of writing.

“We are a question-asking animal. That is our burden and our glory. It’s a burden because, unlike creatures governed entirely by instinct, we puzzle over how to behave, we wonder about where we’ve come from and where we’re going and what, if anything, the journey means.”
(Sanders, Scott Russell. Introduction, *Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*, Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 2007)

The award-winning American essayist points to a Frenchman, Michel de Montaigne, philosopher of the French Revolution and father of the essay, who taught us essay is a derivative of the word, *essai*: “a French verb meaning to make a trial of something.” Sanders reports Montaigne’s motto was, fittingly, “what do I know?”

“Read ironically, that question is self-effacing, as if to say, ‘Who am I to have an opinion on such matters?’ Read straight, the question challenges the writer to discover, what at this moment and within the inevitable constraints of ignorance, he takes to be true — about himself, about our baffling existence, about the universe.” (Sanders, Scott Russell. *Introduction, Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*, Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 2007)

The author continues:

“The term suggests an experiment, a testing, a weighing out. For Montaigne, an essay was an effort to make sense of life — not the whole of life, but some confusing or intriguing portion of it.” (Sanders, Scott Russell. *Introduction, Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*, Touchstone/Simon * Schuster, 2007)

And so it is with those who practice the art of the personal essay, a form of creative nonfiction all its own; the end is a mystery, and that is the point. To find truth and, ultimately, meaning, requires a purposeful consideration, a weighing, a turning, shaping or shifting of what is known and what is not known.

Redefining the Craft Technique, from Horticulturist to Potter

Pruning for Illumination

How does the journey toward understanding advance? Writers examining the process of narrative reflection might be aided by a consideration of other creative pursuits whose determined meanderings feel analogous to the essayist's search for meaning.

Students of creative nonfiction might turn first to the world of landscape architecture to find a suitable metaphor for the role of the reflective narrator in shaping her truth. But as it was with Joyce Carol Oates, it is not so much the plan for the garden that matters, as it is the shape into which we prune the trees.

The horticulturist, Judy Maeir, known for her work with Japanese Maples, has described the process of transformation a tree undergoes at the hand of a gifted artisan — from a solid mound of leaves concealing what's hiding underneath to something more finely layered and textured, where its true essence is visible.

The reflective narrator, too, has branches vying for her attention. Through reflection, implicitly or explicitly, the writer often asks: What would I have done differently back then? What do I know now? The narrator asks these and other questions of herself on the page, sometimes in succession or on replay. The answers are illuminating, both to the author and the work.

Yet essayists are not architects. No, we are probably more in the weeds, the people with the garden gloves and the beat up trucks and a pair of pruning shears rusted from misuse.

In talking about her work with trees, Maier, the expert gardener, calls to mind the essayist's work:

“The job of an aesthetic pruner is to envision the tree without (its) complicating elements, and to simplify it— revealing the beautiful design already within the tree. At times, this can entail a major restructuring; at other times, a gentle touch.” (Maier, Judy. “*Revealing the Essence of the Tree: Aesthetic Pruning of Japanese Maples*,” *Pacific Horticulture*, January 2012.)

Essayists can almost picture themselves with their garden tools sitting at their computers or writing in their journals when they hear Maier's next admonition:

“Look at it from all angles, including from behind, from underneath, and from within the canopy...When finished, the tree will have fewer leaves, but the leaves will stand out more, and the tree will appear more delicate, fresher, and better shaped. You should be able to see light coming through the tree, which will enhance a sense of spaciousness and depth in the garden.” (Maier, Judy. “*Revealing the Essence of the Tree: Aesthetic Pruning of Japanese Maples*,” *Pacific Horticulture*, January 2012.)

This is what nonfiction thought leader and master pruner Vivian Gornick must mean when she calls the nonfiction narrator the person we can trust to “bring us out into a clearing where the sense of things is larger than it was before.”

(Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and Story*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2002, p. 24)

Other experts have described the process of narrative reflection as one in which the essayist explains or discovers the ‘underneath’ of an experience. Just as pruning helps light shine through a tangle of scrub, like Gornick, Phillip Lopate believes that in essay, “the heart of the matter often shines through those

passages where the writer analyzes the meaning of his or her experience through narrative reflection.” (Lopate, Phillip. *Reflection and Retrospection: A Pedagogic Mystery Story, The Fourth Genre*, Michigan State University Press, Volume 7, Issue 1, Spring 2005, p. 143)

Manipulating the Rubik’s Cube

Like other craft specialists, Lopate has referred to narrative reflection as a process of interrogation, the persistent pulse of a curious mind at work. Through narrative reflection, essayists consider and analyze. Like a faithful puzzler, their minds go at the Rubik’s cube of moments they have experienced with tenacity and mental acuity — like cubers, performing quarter turns, double turns, moving the layers and squares of colored plastic around, gleaning just enough information to proceed in the hope of ultimately cracking the code.

We see this in Joan Didion’s noted book chronicling her search for answers in the year following the unexpected death of her husband.

“I see now that my insistence on spending that first night alone was more complicated than it seemed, a primitive instinct.” (p. 32)

Quarter turn:

“Why did I keep stressing what was and was not normal, when nothing about it was?” (p. 83)

Half turn:

“I realized that for the time being I could not trust myself to present a coherent face to the world.” (p. 168)

(Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Vintage Books/Random House, 2005)

To be sure, in narrative reflection we hear the essayist puzzle aloud about what she does not know. Experts in statistics and computer science have written about solving complex puzzles in the absence of human knowledge. “The process of reinforcement learning seeks to create intelligent agents that adapt to an environment by analyzing their own experiences.” (“*Solving the Rubik’s Cube Without Human Knowledge*,” McAleer, Agnostinelli, Baldi and Schmakov, University of California, Irvine, May 2018)

Lopate gets at this kind of repetitive, mental manipulation of narrative reflection with his musings in the essayist’s doctrine, *The Art of the Personal Essay*.

“Personal essayists are adept at interrogating their ignorance. Just as often as they tell us what they know, they ask at the beginning of an exploration of a problem what it is they don’t know — and why. They follow the clue of their ignorance through the maze. Intrigued with their limitations, both physical and mental, they are attracted to cul-de-sac: what one doesn’t understand, or can’t do, is as good a place as any to start investigating the borders of self.” (Lopate, Phillip. *Introduction, The Art of the Personal Essay, An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1995)

This puzzling and unpuzzling Lopate, Hampl and Gornick have spoken about happens largely through narrative reflection. It is explicit. We ask ourselves a sequence of questions about what preoccupies us or voice a series of statements about what we understand. It can be a highly satisfying and productive exercise both for for the writer and the reader. Lopate concurs.

“There is nothing more exciting than to follow a live, candid mind thinking on the page.” (Lopate, Phillip. *To Show and to Tell, The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*, Free Press/Simon and Schuster, 2013, p. 43)

Didion advances her own thinking, continuing to question clearly on the page:

“All through those eight months I had been trying to substitute an alternate reel.” (p. 184)

“What would I have done differently?” “What would he?” (p. 211)

“Until now I had been able only to grieve, not mourn. Grief was passive. Grief happened. Mourning, the act of dealing with grief, required attention.” (Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Vintage Books/Random House, 2005)

The Clay Thrower

Didion is a master at turning things over in her head, talking aloud. Her “interior” is fully alive to us. We are intimate. Some essayists cogitate; others mold, adding layers of new ideas and theories with each new reflection.

Craft experts of the literal kind have written about the art of throwing clay, where the space between the potter’s fingers forces the mud to bend and stretch. As the “throwers” hands move upward, excess clay is repositioned and the work can then be molded into new shapes.

One could argue Cheryl Strayed simulates the effort of a clay thrower in her essay, *The Love of My Life*, about fidelity and love and loss, layering question over statement, pushing past one temporary conclusion to shape another.

“He loved me. Which was mysteriously, unfortunately, precisely the problem.”

“We are not allowed to be deeply sad. Grief is a thing that we are encouraged to let go of, to move on from.”

“We like to say how things are, perhaps because we hope that’s how they might actually be.”

“But what does this do to us, this refusal to quantify love, loss, grief?”

“What does it mean to heal? To move on? To let go?”

“Healing is a small and ordinary and very burnt thing.”

(Strayed, Cheryl. *The Love of My Life, Touchstone Anthology of Contemporary Creative Nonfiction*, Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 2007, p. 500-513)

Admirers of Mexico’s premier ceramic artist, Gustavo Perez, have described his iterative process of throwing clay that students of the craft of literary nonfiction might hope to emulate through narrative reflection. “Pérez explores surface on forms that otherwise sit quietly awaiting recognition,” observes writer Joe Molinaro. (*Ceramics Monthly*, September 2017.) Experts on the art of narrative reflection use phrases like “facing the dragon” and “writing into what is uncomfortable” when talking about creative nonfiction. Molinaro describes how Perez pushes past the edge of security in molding his art.

“To him it felt very strange being too safe, and he felt static in his own work. Pérez stated he has always felt that “if you open a kiln and nothing is wrong, then something is wrong.” (*Ceramics Monthly*, September 2017)

The Editorialist

Critics of journalism have written about editorialists’ capacity for boiling down big topics and finding words that resonate with deep meaning beyond the clamor. Historical figures and journalists like Thomas Paine, Henry Luce and Anna Quindlen come to mind. But nonfiction writers of another kind, not literary journalists but essayists, have created work that is remarkably resonant through their nimbleness in elucidating meaning through narrative reflection.

Ann Patchett, in her book of essays, is one such writer:

“Waltz in, maybe. Make marriage harder if you want to. Outlaw those Vegas chapels with the neon wedding bells...”

“I have never known anyone who went into a marriage thinking they would have to get out...(it is) never easy, blithe. Never.”

“Divorce is in the machine now, like love and birth and death. Its possibility informs us, even when it goes untouched. And if we fail at marriage, we are lucky we don’t have to fail with the force of our whole life. I would like there to be an eighth sacrament: the sacrament of divorce. Like Communion, it is a slim white wafer on the tongue. Like confession, it is forgiveness. Forgiveness is important not so much because we’ve done wrong as because we feel we need to be forgiven. Family, friends, God, whoever loves us forgives us, takes us in again. They are thrilled by our life, our possibilities, our second chances. They weep with gladness that we did not have to die.”
(Patchett, Ann, *The Sacrament of Divorce, This is the Story of a Happy Marriage*, Harper Collins, 2013, p. 68-69)

So, too, is Thomas Lynch an editorialist — the author and undertaker, who contextualizes the meaning of death through narrative reflection in his celebrated work, *The Undertaking*:

“We are always waiting. Waiting for some good word or the winning numbers. Waiting for a sign or wonder, some signal from our dear dead that the dead still care. We are gladdened when they do outstanding things, when they arise from their graves or fall through their caskets or speak to us in our waking dreams. It pleases us no end, as if the dead still cared, had agendas, were yet alive...”

“...The sad and well-known fact of the matter is that most of us will stay in our caskets and be dead a long time, and that our urns and graves will never make a sound. Our reason and requiems, our headstones or High Masses, will neither get us in nor keep us out of heaven. The meaning of our lives, and the memories of them, belong to the living, just as our funerals do. Whatever being the dead have now, they have by the living’s faith alone.” (Lynch, Thomas. *The Undertaking*, W.W. Norton, 1997, p. 13)

The Shapeshifter

When it comes to narrative reflection, nothing quite impresses more than the essayist's ability to shift gears, even in the midst of exposition.

Greek Mythology and popular culture are filled with examples of shape-shifters, from Zeus to Elasti Girl to Sirius Black in Harry Potter. Like the characters that change physically or shift emotionally from supporter to opponent, accused to observer, some essayists are so dexterous, so fluid with narrative reflection, their words — indeed, their role — seem to change shape within a single sentence. A fine example of this is the lightly whipped but potent narrative reflection of Gretel Ehrlich, in her collection of essays from her time out West.

“I met my husband at a John Wayne film festival in Cody, Wyoming... After signing for our license at the county courthouse, we were given a complimentary care package, a Pandora's box of grotesqueries: Midol, Kotex, disposable razors, shaving cream, a bar of soap — a summing up, I suppose, of what in a marriage we could look forward to: blood, pain, unwanted hair, headaches and dirt. ‘Hey, where's the champagne and cigars?’ I asked.” (Ehrlich, Gretel. *Just Married, The Solace of Open Spaces*, Penguin, 1985, p. 86-87.)

Arriving at Meaning, Shared Understanding

Clichéd quotes about ‘journey over destination’ paraphrasing or mis-attributing everyone from Lao Tzu to Ralph Waldo Emerson keeps screen printers in business, litter the Internet and the discount, framed-art aisle at craft

superstores. Yet for the students of another craft, creative nonfiction, the cliché has perhaps never been more apt.

In *The Situation and the Story*, Vivian Gornick famously argues that for writers of creative nonfiction, it's the journey toward meaning that ultimately matters. In the essay genre, narrative reflection is both the journey and the roadmap. Without it, we have only the circumstance — the postcards and Instagram posts from a scenic and pleasant trip. Without narrative reflection, there is no arrival point, no emotional Mecca, Mt. Kilimanjaro or Grand Canyon. Or, as Gornick puts it, "Without telling, the reader is left asking, so what?" Lopate puts the journey in even finer metaphorical context:

"In personal essays, we must rely on the subjective voice of the first-person narrator to guide us. If that voice can never explain, summarize, interpret, or provide a larger 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." (Lopate, Phillip. *Reflection and Retrospection: A Pedagogic Mystery Story, The Fourth Genre*, Michigan State University Press, Volume 7, Issue 1, Spring 2005, p. 143)

Pruner, prober, potter, puzzler: by embracing narrative reflection in all its permutations, the essayist's journey toward meaning may doubtless be more circuitous, but it will also be more fruitful. The craft technique of narrative reflection is an essential and rewarding exercise, not just for writer but for reader. As Lopate enthusiastically reminds us: "The willingness to wrest as much understanding as the writer is humanly capable of arriving at.... this is the reward of prose." Yet the best reward is not just the pleasure of a well-chronicled interior journey. It is the shared understanding that journey produces. As Patricia Hampl best expressed: "You tell me your story and somehow I get my story."