

ENCLOSURES: THE NARRATIVE WITHIN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Judith Fishman

Teachers of composition typically give small billing to narrative. Center stage goes to academic, impersonal, objective writing, namely “exposition.” Narrative, if it is considered at all, is seen as creative, personal, subjective—a short subject, not equal to the main event. When we look outside the field of composition, however, we hear other news about narrative. We discover that narrative—the telling or writing of *story*, one’s own story or those fictitious—is a more complex act than we teachers of writing have generally assumed, and as such, deserving more of our attention.

The writer Joan Didion talks about narrative this way:

We tell ourselves stories in order to live. The princess is caged in the consulate. The man with the candy will lead the children into the sea. The naked woman on the ledge outside the window on the sixteenth floor is a victim of accidie, or the naked woman is an exhibitionist, and it would be “interesting” to know which. We tell ourselves that it makes a difference whether the naked woman is about to commit a moral sin or is about to register a political protest or is about to be, the Aristophanic view, snatched back to the human condition by the fireman in priest’s clothing just visible in the window behind her, the one smiling at the telephoto lens. We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the “ideas” with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.¹

Didion talks of a time in her life, from 1966 to 1971, when she doubted the “premises” of all stories she had ever told herself, when she had difficulty imposing a narrative line upon disparate images, when she doubted the narrative and “the narrative’s intelligibility.” Her life, she said, was like a “cutting-room experience”; the images were like flash pictures—she could not apprehend a plot. This time in her own life coincided with the chaos she saw about her—the 60’s, when everything seemed to be falling

apart when the center, as she says in her essay, “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” was not holding. The narrative line, then, is a way of centering, of holding things together, of selecting out of the randomness; it is a forming, a shaping, a necessary means of making sense of it all, a way of finding the lesson, the “sermon,” of getting to “ideas,” of seeing *and* interpreting. We might say that the process involves a twin movement—a selecting out, imposing a narrative line *and* interpreting, making sense out of what we select.

In his analysis of oral narratives, sociolinguist William Labov talks of this process as he argues that narrative is more than a perfunctory recording of “an a and then a b.” Narrative holds within it two central ingredients: the narrative core (the “a and then the b”) and what Labov calls *evaluation*. In our narratives we find an evaluative thread, an answer to the question *so what?* Labov says that whenever we tell a story, we assume an audience who wants to know why we are telling it, that we know they will lose patience if our story has no point—explicit or implicit. Labov thus defines evaluation as the “means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d’être*, why it was told, and what the narrator is getting at.”²

The story then is both selection and interpretation, the structuring of an event and the evaluation of it, a fundamental means of ordering and understanding. Didion talks about imposing a narrative line and interpreting the shifting phantasmagoria. She tells us that when she could not impose the narrative line and interpret what was out there, she suffered a mental breakdown. Didion’s words echo a number of scholars from a number of fields who are studying the nature of narrative. From psychoanalyst to historian to sociolinguist to psychologist to literary critic, to a special breed of linguist who call themselves narratologists, narrative is a central concern. The historian Hayden White says, “To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture, and possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself.”³ The terms used to discuss narrative are many: emplotment, narrativity, anti-narrativity, construct, context, chunking, historic event, event, experience, enclosure. Barbara Hermstein Smith talks of a process she calls enclosure:

It would seem in the common land of ordinary events—where many experiences are fragmentary, interrupted, fortuitously connected, and determined by causes beyond our agency or comprehension—we create to seek out ‘enclosures’: structures that are highly organized, separated as if by an implicit frame from a background of relative

disorder or randomness and integral or complete.⁴

And Frank Kennode talks of “fictive concords”:

Men, like poets, rush ‘into the midst,’ *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems.⁵

George Kelly, the American psychologist talks about “constructs,” which he says are “transparent patterns or templates” that we fit on the apprehendable world. Our constructs are real, they are systems or structures we live by. We create them in order to interpret the world and to anticipate events.⁶ Beginnings and endings are not out there—we construct them—they are of our making. We construct our worlds according to how we are able, and if we are lucky, how we choose. A story is made of constructs. It is a narrative sequencing that we lay on apprehendable reality, on the shifting phantasmagoria, on the randomness. And within the large construct of story are smaller ones: beginnings and endings that we select.

British critic Barbara Hardy tells us that we can learn a great deal about this process of ordering the randomness when we study fiction. Narrative, she says, is “not to be regarded as an aesthetic invention used by *artists* to control, manipulate, and order experience, but a primary act of mind transferred to art from life.” Writers of fiction know this point of narrative, they know it better than critics, she says, and she suggests that we go to fiction to find out about narrative. She suggests that we study the patterns in fiction to understand how we organize life.⁷ I am going to follow her lead and suggest that we study patterns of fiction to shed light on the writing of our students—and for the remainder of this paper, I will look to what we can learn from fiction about students’ writing, particularly their writing of personal stories.

In the following narrative, let us explore some of those elements of fiction that give us a way of reading student writing:

When I was in elementary school, I was allowed to wear only dresses to school; somehow they all merge into my mind now as green plaid dresses with white, organdy aprons—starched. Pants were allowed, but not in public. Pants were for after school, insisted upon after school: as I would enter the house, my mother would say,

“Take off your school clothes and put on your play clothes.” To this day, I still change my clothes the minute I get home from work.

Anyway by the time I had reached fourth grade, I had begun to wear my mother down, to convince her, first to let me buy a pair of jeans (which in my mind were far different from pants), and then, to let me wear the jeans to school. Each day I would ask if today was the day and argue when I was told it was not: “It looks like rain” or “I’m playing with Ann after school and we might go into the woods,” or “The Girl Scouts are going on a hike.” And always the answer: “Girls don’t wear jeans to school.”

One day in the spring, I remember, after it had rained for a long period and the streets were still deep with puddles and the path to school was muddy, I asked—and won. My mother agreed.

And, finally, there I was, in my jeans, walking along the main street up the hill to the railroad tracks right by the firehouse, waiting there to cross the tracks and climb the wooden steps dug deep into Kinnick’s hill, standing there in my jeans and spring jacket, and there, just as I was to cross the road, a car came by, fast and dug right into the puddle in front of me, splashing me—all over with water and mud. I turned around and went home to change into my dress.⁸

The experienced writer of fiction knows options within narrative for controlling time, for beginning, for ending, for structuring plot, showing character, tension, point of view. Here within this little story, we can look at these same elements of fiction.

Let us begin with time: by looking at the structure of the piece, how it begins, where it ends, where the “once” appears, how it is enclosed. The piece begins with a generalized description signaled by *when*: when I was in elementary school, this is the way things were. Patterns of that childhood experience follow, the way things repeatedly were, mingled with a cross-over to the writer’s present—the plaid dresses merging in her mind now, the changing of clothes *now*, as an adult: “To this day, I still change my clothes the minute I get home from work.” The patterns from childhood spill over into adulthood. The conflict between the two characters, mother and daughter, is revealed and carried through time in the writer’s past until we reach the once, the “one day in the spring” of the third paragraph. The story, set into the rainy day, advances with the mother’s permission granted, the walk to the railroad tracks, the splashing, the return home.

We need to distinguish between the generalized description of the past and the once, the *when I was in elementary school* and the *one day in spring*, to show the once against the way things were, the patterns of the past and the way things happened on that one day. The *once* happened as it did, never to occur again in the same way, but the once is seen against the patterns, the repetitions. Students need to see the uniqueness, the inscape, the singularity of the event in relation to the patterns and in relation to the present; they can then ask what the story meant then and what it means now—and they can select among, as Didion says, “the multiple choices.” Here then is where interpretation, evaluation lives—it may be embedded or explicit; it may show itself as a moral, “Boy, I learned to listen to my mother,” or as a contrast between patterns of childhood and adulthood, or as an evaluative thread that runs throughout.

In the telling and in the explaining, the writer has decisions to make. She may have begun differently, she could have entered the event through a description, say, of the rain-soaked streets as she draws the curtain of her bedroom window and then looks, longingly, at the pair of jeans hanging in the closet—or she can show the mother and daughter engaged in dialogue, bringing to immediacy the argument, the tension between the characters. Depending upon her intentions—upon how she wants to see and re-see and upon how she wants her audience to see, she constructs her story. She selectively attends to the details of her past and her present. William James provides a useful term here—*selective attention*—which is a selecting out of the general stream of consciousness; we pay attention to some objects or details to the exclusion of others. We “welcome” or “reject” some, we choose “from among them . . . all the while.”⁹ The critical word here is *choice*; out of the phantasmagoria, as writers, we can choose. We can make decisions about time, about character, about detail, about point of view.

The teller of this story gives us an adult perspective, the adult looking back upon the past. We see texture, hear distinct melodic lines, and tones, as we distinguish the child’s point of view from the adult’s, the narrator’s present perspective set against the past. Does the adult look back in anger, tolerance, bemusement, wisdom, nostalgia at the child experiencing the event in anger, frustration, humor?

And what of character? The adult narrator, a character, looks at the child and the mother as characters within a fiction. The insight into self as character or characters within the narrative, both of self and others, opens

further still the complexity and richness of choice. Elizabeth Bruss suggests that writers of autobiography must first know “how much fiction is implicit in the idea of a ‘self.’” Students are surprised to see that they reveal themselves as tellers of a story and as characters within story. At the same time when they see that they have choices to make, that they can select, that they can foreground or background a character, that they can understand their intentions, they relinquish some of the fear of self exposure, for they need not tell all about everyone—or anyone—and the seeing of themselves as *characters* allows them to consider their choices as matters of rhetoric.

The writer creates the text, the multiplicity of characteristics within character, the tension between characters (the tension here in this family that is archetypal, the child tugging against the parent, the pull between dependence and independence). All this we see in this story—and more, as well—if we want to talk about plot, about description, and dialogue.

Students come to the writing of narrative with misconceptions: they believe they must tell a story in the order in which an event occurred; they are stuck to chronology, and they fear exposure—they don’t want to tell too much, and perhaps we don’t want them to, either, for we fear their self indulgence and self revelation. In a recent *College English* article, Margaret Byrd Boegeman talks about teachers of writing being generally suspicious of autobiographical writing and of narrative, in particular. She says that autobiographical writing is accused of being loosely structured, undisciplined, informal, potentially self indulgent.¹⁰ It is not the kind of writing students will be asked to do, out there in the real world. And autobiographical writing is exclusively narrative, and we know about narrative: it is the easiest “form” for students to handle. Autobiographical writing, we assume, simply writes itself. And narrative is simply a matter of recording chronology.

I am suggesting that narrative is much more, that we have given short shrift to it in the teaching of writing. The writer of narrative is an interpreter, a selector, a giver of meaning, a shaper, a creator of text. Writing stories out of one’s own life involves choices within the boundaries and conventions of writing. I am suggesting that we need to expose the conventions that are inherent within even the simplest narrative to see the life and the poem that is there.

Curiously, if our students were enrolled in our creative writing

classes or in our literature classes, we would help them harness these very elements as they try their hands at writing and reading fiction. We would coach them to see these elements within literature, and we would use the skills *we* have developed in reading literature. Yet in this grey area of composition, we do not draw on what we know very well.

Autobiographical writing—particularly the writing of personal narrative—is not a matter of turning a life into text, it is a matter of construction. Each time we relate a story, it is both old and new: there are the events that we draw from our lives that we construct into a text and there is the new—our angle of vision, our selection, our memory, our vision, our interpretation, our age, the moment of writing. Kierkegaard in *Repetition* talks of a double action that is a simultaneous moving backward and forward. What is recollected has been repeated backwards, whereas repetition is recollected forward:

The dialectic of repetition is easy, for what is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated, but precisely the fact that it has been gives to repetition the character of novelty. When the Greeks said that all knowledge is recollection they affirmed that all that is has been; when one says that life is a repetition one affirms that existence which has been now becomes.¹¹

“Behold,” he says, “we can make all things new.”

When we tell a story, we do just that, we make it new. We illumine the then with the now. The process of enclosing in story then is much more than a chronological rendering. Within the narrative inheres the material to interpret, to shape, to give meaning, to ask and attempt to answer why—to infuse the old with the new. We can help our students know the power of fashioning constructs, of creating stories, of making “things new.”

Queens College, City University of New York
Flushing, New York

NOTES

¹ Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), p. 11.

² William Labov, "The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax," *Language in the Inner City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), p. 366.

³ Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, 7 (Autumn 1980), 5.

⁴ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 2.

⁵ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford, 1966), p. 7.

⁶ George Kelly, *A Theory of Personality* (New York: Norton, 1963), p. 8.

⁷ Barbara Hardy, "Towards a Poetics of Fiction: An Approach through Narrative," in *The Cool Web*, eds. Margaret Meek, Aidan Warlow, and Griselda Barton (New York: Atheneum, 1978), p. 12.

⁸ The piece was written by Janet Smith in a freshman composition course at Queens College, spring semester, 1980.

⁹ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), I, 284-286.

¹⁰ Margaret Byrd Boegeman, "Lives and Literacy: Autobiography in Freshman Composition," *College English* 41 (February 1980), 662-665.

¹¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology*, trans. Walter Lowrie (1941; reprint ed., New York, Evanston, and London, 1964), p. 33.