

Writing My Own Story: Memoir, Narrative Truth, and Memory

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Such are the splendors and miseries of memory: it is proud of its ability to keep truthful track of the logical sequence of past events; but when it comes to how we experienced them at the time, memory feels no obligation to truth. –Milan Kundera, Encounters (p.75)

I think that is the big danger in keeping a diary: you exaggerate everything.
–Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea (p. 1)

What is the difference between memory and memoir? In other words, what are the differences between memory, truth, and narrative truth? Memoir as narrative truth contains both facts and fiction, the real and the made up, the *was* and the might-have-been, or perhaps the never-was but should have been. Writing your own story is a way of controlling truth as narrative truth, setting boundaries, settling scores, an act of remembering and revision, altering fact in order to solidify a truth about your own life. In other words, becoming both the creator and the critic of your own experiences, what truth your experiences represent to the world. Writers from Henry James to Hemingway, Henry Miller, Joan Didion and Doris Lessing, often claim that fiction is a *higher* truth than mere “truth.” Which also brings up the question, when writing our own stories, are we even aware of what is fact and what is fiction, what is real and what is made up?

Fact and fiction are like two machines coupled to one another, a fragmented and fragmentary flow of memory and desire. Deleuze and Guattari: “There is always a flow-producing machine, and another machine connected to it that interrupts or draws off part of this flow... Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows.” (Anti-Oedipus, p. 5). Subjective producing producing a subjective object: the memoir, frozen in place, both fact and fiction. Eventually, the memoir will (hopefully) connect with reader and/or critic, and the whole process starts up again.

Rather than trying to answer these questions through more extended theory and analysis, I thought I would demonstrate the process instead, by presenting two competing and complementary prologues: a (sort of objective) prologue and a (definitely) subjective prologue.

(Sort of) Objective Prologue

The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths.
—Bruce Nauman, 1967

The premise of fiction is that writers can be more truthful by freeing themselves from the obligation to “fact.” Writers, just like everyone, may hold back from full disclosure when dealing with uncomfortable or embarrassing experiences. In fiction, a.k.a. an artfully constructed narrative, writers can be more open, honest, and *truthful*. Change the names, the places, the details, and this process magically creates a *higher* truth than what really happened by *universalizing* the experience. In other words, lying about the base metal of facts is the alchemical process for producing the gold of truth.

This romantic idea, the power of the imagination to *reveal* a higher truth, has always been metaphysical mumbo-jumbo bordering on religious faith, the illusion that something that isn't there is somehow more *real* than the something that is there. Even in memoir, where writers supposedly expose themselves in order to tell the truth about their life experiences, the memoirist is always also being untruthful; telling is also not-telling, because when we select details, events, and people to include, we also leave out other details, events, and people as part of the shaping of a story. Indeed, the belief that our lives can be self-fashioned and told in causal, narrative nonfiction is itself a fiction: we're altering, staging, and often *just making it up*. For some of us, lies are the only truth we have to offer.

So, the *fiction* of fiction is that fiction contains a higher truth; the made-up is more *real* than real. Hemingway: "All good books have one thing in common—they are truer than if they had really happened." Okay. The boasting artist as magus, magician, creator of a world more real than the world, transcending *die Augenblicke* of a life into the permanence of art and beauty. It's the long con, pulled off by a sleight-of-hand man on an all-too-willing audience of rubes looking for some magic to believe in. The demented Dr. Kinbote's description of John Shade's artistic process in *Pale Fire*: "I am witnessing a unique physiological phenomenon: John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse. And I experienced the same thrill as when in my early boyhood I watched across the tea table in my uncle's castle a conjurer who had just given a fantastic performance" (Nabokov, 2011, p. 27). Even in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale," the fancy cannot cheat so well, deceiving elf.

Nietzsche believed that there were no facts, just interpretations. Well, of course there are facts, as well as interpretations of facts, different fields of inquiry having different levels of fact value,¹ but there is also interpretation, and interpretation is a moving away from fact, transforming fact into something else, something other: subjective meaning, subjective value. Opinion. What follows here is what Susan Sontag called "the author naked." Facts, truth. The places are real, the people are real, the narrator is really me, and most importantly the experiences all really happened. Someone else may choose to interpret the facts differently, but the facts are facts. I could have changed the names, the places, and the details for several reasons, including the shakedown that by fictionalizing them I'm being more open, honest, and truthful, but why bullshit the truth?

(Definitely) Subjective Prologue

It's true and not true at the same time.
—Bruce Nauman, commenting on above quote

I'm not really sure what happened, or how it happened, and I was there. I mean, I experienced everything here, but I can only know what happened to me, if even that.

¹ One of British philosopher Stephen Toulmin's great insights, that the truth value for fields such as mathematics and biology is much higher than the truth value for fields like social sciences or literary criticism.

So, this is an interpretation of what happened, but there are other interpretations as well, from what other people could tell if they were into telling. Much of what we tell each other are self-serving lies, half-truths, and face-savers. Much of what we tell ourselves are also self-serving lies, half-truths, and face-savers. Joseph Conrad called words “the great foes of reality.” This rearranged, reconstructed, re-imagined, selected debris of my life and mind is my story, my interpretation of my story, my truth mined through the universalizing/alchemizing of my story.

At forty-three, I nearly died in a car crash in a snowstorm in the Swiss Alps. I still don't understand how I'm not dead, the car sliding across a patch of ice on a snowy mountain road, the passenger side wheels slipping off the edge of the road, the mountain, looking down into the darkness, about to drop off into the void, and suddenly, instead of being crushed after crashing into the Rhone River 9,000 feet below in the Switzerdeutsch speaking part of the country, I'm sitting on the crushed hood of the car having gone through the windshield, the car crashing into the side of the mountain and not off the mountain into the river, thin glass shards acupuncture in my scalp, blood dripping down my face. Seatbelt? I don't remember. Maybe it broke, maybe I forgot to buckle it. There's a lot I don't remember about that moment, and sometimes I believe that maybe I died there and everything that followed is some kind of Lost-style flash-forward afterlife. All I know for sure is this: every moment, the abyss is coming, for me, for us all.

Scholars of One Candle

“Though Pyotr Alexandrovitch may have exaggerated, still there must have been some semblance of truth in his story.” –Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*

We always assume that there is some bedrock of fact behind fiction, and, conversely, some fiction behind memoir. The interplay of fact and fiction is called *narrative truth* and the belief that narrative truth is somehow truer than true is itself a metaphysical fiction, assuming that there is somehow something beyond what's printed on the page. The entire study of literature does not exist without this assumption.

In his poem “The Latest Freed Man,” Wallace Stevens reformulates Keats's concept of negative capability, “that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties. Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason,” (Rollins, 1958, pp. 193-4) into seeing “everything bulging and blazing and big in itself” (Stevens, p. 218). True or false, fact or fiction, is, was, or might-have-been or even could-have-been, narrative truth is individual truth, a chance to break free from being “scholars of one candle” (Stevens, p. 441) and becoming artists of “Arctic effulgence” (Stevens, p. 441), memory itself, objective and subjective, a shivering residue of life.

References

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