

Taking Yourself Out of the Story: Narrative Stance and the Upright Pronoun

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Portrait
Biography

Recently, I assigned an advanced class of undergraduate writers to observe a dynamic event and write precisely about what they saw, heard, smelled, and so on. The event could be anything—construction workers framing a wall, a florist arranging a bouquet, the aftermath of a rock concert.

So they wrote of glimpsing the vice-president and his entourage on vacation at Figure Eight Island, watching a rambunctious couple at a movie theater, filming a movie on location, witnessing the protests in Washington, DC, against the World Trade Organization, and so on.

All but two wrote of their own thoughts and feelings about the events—and only secondarily about the events themselves. In many descriptions, it was hardly possible to know what event the writer was actually witnessing. The sensibility of the author was present in virtually every line, but the other people in the stories—the ones the stories were purportedly *about*—were distant and vague.

Factual writers of an earlier generation swore by a code of objectivity: Never let the reporter enter the story. If a reference to the actual person observing events was unavoidable, the writer would duck behind some impersonal shield, referring to himself only as “this reporter” or even “the reporter.” As if to admit to the audience that to have a real-live person—full of bias and emotion—on the scene would be to falsify the provable truth of the thing witnessed.

For us, who cut our teeth on the New Journalism of Tom Wolfe and the personal essays of Joan Didion rather than in deadline newsrooms, it seems only natural to participate in the story. And often including ourselves in the story does make it sound more natural, more honest, more real.

But too often these days, I'm afraid we writers of nonfiction fall into the opposite fallacy: We enter the story whether it needs us or not.

For the reader, this can be distracting, even annoying, diverting

attention from the real “star” of the piece. The reader perceives us clamoring for attention and rightly resents it. And, as in many of my students' pieces, participation by the author can actually confuse the reader about the literal action of the story.

TWO WAYS FOR THE WRITER TO ENTER THE STORY

There are two ways in which a writer can participate in a story: The first and most obvious is in a direct first-person telling, using “the upright pronoun.” It's hard to write a memoir or a personal essay without falling back on the “I.” In fact, all nonfiction is really told in the technical first-person point of view: There is always a narrator doing the telling, and the narrator is not some fictional persona but the author.

This single point of view is one of the important—and frustrating—hallmarks that distinguishes nonfiction from fiction. *

Yet there are ways to mimic other points of view—and thereby to tell a more natural sort of story.

Listen to the opening lines of Daniel Bergner's *God of the Rodeo: The Search for Hope, Faith, and a Six-Second Ride in Louisiana's Angola Prison*: “When he had finished work—building fence or penning cattle or castrating bull calves with a knife supplied by his boss on the prison farm—Johnny Brooks lingered in the saddle shed. The small cinder-block building is near the heart of Angola, Louisiana's maximum-security state penitentiary. Alone there, Brooks placed his saddle on the wooden rack in the middle of the room, leapt onto it, and imagined himself riding in the inmate rodeo coming up in October.”

No sign yet of the author—a strictly third-person presentation. But we know exactly where we are, exactly whom to pay attention to—a convict cowboy—and even what he wants out of life: to ride in the rodeo. The author won't enter the story directly for many more lines; he'll duck in once to let us know he's there and then disappear for long stretches, allowing the reader to watch Brooks and the other inmates train for the rodeo in the confines of one of the most remote and fearsome prisons in the world.

But in fact, of course, the author has been with us in every line, in the second way that an author participates in a nonfiction story: tone.

Tone is nothing more or less than the attitude of the author, expressed in the words he chooses, the selection and ordering of events, and the rhythms of language. It is the intelligence behind the words, the author's implicit sense of what things mean. Of who is admirable or contemptible, what is important or trivial, how the characters' *

choices and actions resonate in the author's moral universe.

The moral stance of the piece will be reflected in its tone.

Even without an "I" narrator, we can hear it when an author doesn't approve of something, or finds it humorous, or is awed or confused or skeptical. Tone, as we experience it in the lines and between the lines, tells us the author's sense of right and wrong, his sense of proportion and outlook on the world. It's the reason we either trust a story or don't, either turn away in irritation or remain captivated.

It's not voice, exactly—it's the *tone of voice*.

So in the excerpt above, we hear a subdued admiration in Bergner's tone of voice: Here's a man who's already worked a hard day in the outdoors and now is taking a few minutes to dream. The man is in a hopeless place, but he still has aspirations. And by the way, he can be trusted with a knife—whatever violent acts landed him in Angola, now he seems just another lonesome cowboy.

Later, Bergner will enter the story directly and in earnest—because he will need to. He'll have no choice: The story he thinks he is getting for his first six months inside the prison—the one he can tell in an assured third person—will turn out to be a sham, a reality invented by the inmates to please the warden, who has become for Bergner almost a surrogate father, and who has earned the writer's genuine admiration. But the warden will betray him—ask for a bribe to assure continued access to the prison—and that becomes a huge part of a story that started out to be about a rodeo.

Bergner must actually sue the warden in federal court in order to regain access to the prison, and from that moment on he discovers a very different story: "But now that the staff knew I wasn't his [the warden's] man, they were glad to answer my questions. . . . The inmates, too, felt free to talk. One told me of a rumor that had circulated before the lawsuit: that I was Warden Cain's spy. Why else, the convicts had reasoned, would I be allowed to roam the prison and hold my interviews without anyone listening in?"

So the second half of the book is as much about Bergner's struggle to learn the truth and come to terms with his own emotions in the aftermath of the warden's betrayal as it is about prison cowboys, and this ratchets up the danger, physical as well as emotional, and results in a much more profound insight into the nature of Angola than a feature about the rodeo would have done: Here is a place where even the truth can be controlled by the will of a single man.

The final violence of the rodeo arena becomes a release for long-escalating tensions and a metaphorical spectacle that embodies nearly every aspect of prison life we have come to know: the crowd arrives,

hoping for blood, and remains physically segregated from the inmates, who are dressed in prison stripes, as they gamely ride and rope and dodge charging Brahman bulls—and are bruised, thrown, broken, and trampled.

Bergner stands back and lets us watch the rodeo, and we're hardly aware of his presence: It's the spectacle he wants us to watch, not him.

NARRATIVE STANCE POV + TONE + *psychic distance*

If you combine point of view, tone, and one more element, you create a narrative stance. That third element is psychic distance: how near or far the writer, and thus the reader, remains from the people and events in the story.

"Tiananmen Square,"¹ from *The Darkness Crumbles* by BBC correspondent John Simpson, begins with an intermediate psychic distance: "It was humid and airless, and the streets around our hotel were empty. We had set out for Tiananmen Square—reporter, producer, cameraman, sound-recordist, translator, lighting man, complete with gear. A cyclist rode past, shouting and pointing, What it meant we couldn't tell." *sets the scene*

Simpson is, of course, the "reporter." He's giving us a first-person account, but he's focused on external details, not his own thoughts and feelings. He even presents the BBC crew as if he were an outsider. And he doesn't speculate on what the bicyclist's gesture means.

He continues at this remove, reporting on the "human river" flowing through the Gate of Heavenly Peace into the square, where hundreds of groups of demonstrators have gathered around radios. He observes that these are not students but older, harder workers, "singing, chanting, looking forward to trouble." *scene w/ chars.*

The BBC crew starts interviewing and filming—a boy with Coke-bottle Molotov cocktails stuck in his waistband; rowdy workers wearing red head cloths and brandishing knives, spears, and bricks—and Simpson retains his reporter's distance. But soon that detachment dissolves. Caught in the middle of a situation that is fast turning ugly, the crew starts arguing. Against all his professional training, Simpson goes off on his own.

An armored car enters the square, is firebombed, escapes. A second is attacked and crashes into a concrete barrier. The mob swarms over it. Simpson spots his cameraman in the melee around the burning

¹ Reprinted in *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism*, edited by Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda. New York: Scribner, 1997.

2. target lines

armored car, and the psychic distance closes fast: "Now I was the one fighting, struggling to get through the crowd, pulling people back, pushing them out of my path, swearing, a big brutal Englishman stronger than any of them."

We're right there inside his sensibility as he becomes caught up in the chaos and becomes an active participant in it.

As the first crewman of the burning armored car tries to escape, the mob pounces on him and beats him to death in seconds. The second soldier emerges, and the blood-crazed mob literally rips the skin off his face, then beats his skull until his brains spill onto the ground.

As the third and last crewman is dragged out of the vehicle, a bus full of students arrives on the scene—they have come to rescue the soldier from the mob. But the mob is tough, and a deadly tug-of-war ensues, with the soldier in the middle. Simpson realizes how this is going to end: with the grotesque murder of the third soldier. He reports, "It seemed to me then that I couldn't look on any longer, a passive observer, watching another man's skin torn away or his head broken open, and do nothing."

target lines

Simpson screams obscenities at a man trying to cave in the soldier's skull with a brick: "The ferocity of the crowd had entered me, but I felt it was the crowd that was the animal, that it wasn't properly human." Simpson then hurls himself bodily at the man, overpowering him, and the students pull the soldier into the bus, and to safety.

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The psychic distance has closed in considerably: we are not only inside Simpson's sensibility; we are also acting vicariously with him to change the outcome of the story, and in the process we hear an unmistakable tone of judgment, the moral stance of the writer, implicit in his words and, in this case, exemplified by his actions. Calling himself "this reporter" just won't do. He has entered the story and must account for himself: what he's doing there and why.

And Simpson doesn't conclude there. He relates how he and the crew rushed their film back to the hotel so as not risk its being confiscated by the authorities when the army arrived in force. Then he confesses: "I now feel guilty about that decision; it was wrong: we ought to have stayed in the Square, even though the other camera crews had already left and it might have cost us our lives." The psychic distance has closed in utterly: Now we are not just inside Simpson's sensibility and judgment; we are looking not out but in. He is no longer judging events but himself. Then he continues the paragraph: "Someone should have been there when the massacre took place, filming what happened, showing the courage of the students as they were sur-

rounded by tanks and the army advancing, firing as it went?"

The psychic distance has opened slightly again, like the aperture on a camera admitting more light to expose the film. And the camera is once again aimed outward.

Simpson closes this remarkable journalistic memoir with a metaphor taken from the events of the day. From the balcony of his hotel, which looks down into the Square, he watches as soldiers unroll something and lift it into place: "Soon a great curtain of black cloth covered the entrance to Tiananmen Square. What was happening there was hidden from us."

Now he is restored to his former detachment, his former long psychic distance from the students and the massacre, in an almost cinematic fade to black. But of course, this time the distance is not voluntary, and what lingers in the metaphor is a longing to see behind the curtain, to close the distance again, to be back among the crowd, bearing witness.

DISSENT, scene setting enters

detached

enters

WHAT THEY DON'T TELL YOU ABOUT THE "I" NARRATOR

When Hurricane Fran slammed ashore directly into my hometown of Wilmington, North Carolina, in September of 1996, our waterside neighborhood was wrecked: houses smashed and flooded, glorious old live-oak trees torn out by the roots and splayed across wires and speared into roofs, our little harbor transformed into one big shipwreck.

My wife and I spent a long night huddled inside our closet in terror as the eyewall swept over us, and as soon as we emerged in the morning and saw the awesome scale of the damage, I knew I would have to write about it.

What stunned me was not just the physical destruction but also the awful fear I had felt for all those hours, and afterward, the eradication of beauty, the black depression into which it catapulted me, and the depth of my inarticulate anger. With the power out and no running water, in the week following the hurricane, I wrote an essay about enduring the brunt of a major hurricane—longhand, often working by the light of a kerosene lantern.

Instinctively, as I wrote the first line, I made a decision about point of view and narrative stance: "What they don't tell you about hurricanes is the uncertainty." The "I" pronoun was not big enough to do what I wanted it to do. We had suffered during the hurricane, but what I wanted to write about was a whole community of people who had suffered worse, and who had suffered together. The "you" became

How we handle trauma

a way of inviting the reader to become part of that community.

The essay did not get published right away, and even at the time it was being rejected, I knew exactly why—I just couldn't do anything about it: I was still too much in the essay. Or at least, my anger was. I just couldn't get it out. It was a matter of tone: No reader, I felt sure, would suffer through a dozen pages of white-hot anger.

In an odd sense, my research wasn't finished yet.

I needed to get to the other side of the depression brought on by the tremendous destruction, to witness the return of normalcy and beauty, and those things took nearly all of the two years between the time I wrote that first lantern-light draft and the publication of what became a very different piece—different mostly in tone, that invisible, elusive quality.

So it wasn't enough to take out the upright pronoun. I also had to put some psychic distance between me and the experience in order to have the detachment to work my craft.

And even after the piece was in print, I felt a sense of unfinished business. The essay ends with our world destroyed, and that didn't turn out to be the whole story. The ancient Greeks understood that it's not enough to destroy the world; you have a responsibility to rebuild it, to set the stars back in the heavens, to restore order to the universe. So in a second essay, I picked up the story there and recounted how a couple of days after the storm, all the neighbors pitched in during an exhausting twelve-hour day to rebuild our harbor, to salvage what could be salvaged, and how I experienced a sense of absolution, the beginning of a long, slow healing process that came out of that ancient and priceless expression of community. That was the true ending of the story: taking back control of our lives, together.

That was the lesson: It wasn't about *me*; it was about *us*.

EXERCISES

1. Without using any first-person pronouns (*I, me, my, mine, we, our, ours*, etc.), write an accurate scene about an incident you witnessed firsthand.
2. Take the above scene and rewrite it twice, each time expressing a different tone—anger, fear, humor, sarcasm, etc.—between the lines.
3. Take a piece of narrative writing you admire and, in the margins, indicate shifts in psychic distance—in or out. Now take a piece of narrative you have written and do the same.

The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Writer

ROBIN HEMLEY

One of the greatest difficulties for the writer of longer nonfiction is figuring out the structure of the book. For me, this has been one of my major hurdles, why I seem to stew about a book for a year or so before coming to an understanding of what I'm writing about and how to go about writing it. The three works of nonfiction I've struggled with are quite different in subject matter and approach, and perhaps it would be helpful to examine my strategies in terms of figuring out how I put them together and tried to make them seem cohesive.

THE OUTLINE

One of these books, *Turning Life Into Fiction*, a book on writing form, probably can't be categorized as creative nonfiction, and I was going to jettison it from the discussion, except that I realize I did some things structurally in the writing of this book that might be helpful to other writers of creative nonfiction.

I am not one to write outlines. I hate outlines. I hate the idea of outlines. I'm one of these artsy types, who, if not relying solely on inspiration, at least tries to allow a book to proceed *organically*. Remember that word. We artsy types use it often. It basically means we don't know what the hell we're doing and it wouldn't take us so long to finish a book if we wrote a simple outline. So . . . organic. Remember this word. If someone asks you what you're writing about, tell her you don't know, that you're going to let the subject matter arise organically.

But with *Turning Life Into Fiction*, the publishers wanted a chapter-by-chapter outline, in which I wrote down more or less what each chapter would contain. The outline helped . . . for a while. And then, about halfway through the book, I realized that the outline was all wrong and I needed to change the chapters and their ordering completely. That's the thing about outlines. As far as I can tell, they don't