

MEMORY AS METAPHOR

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From *Breathing the Page*

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How can I be confident about working with memories that do not coincide with those who shared them?

Everything is memory.

If you were to look around and scan the space you are currently in, could you locate anything with which you have no associative memory? You might say, "that odd outlet on the adjacent wall." You don't know what it is used for. Or the man sitting ahead of you on the bus wearing a baseball cap with two immature eagle feathers sticking out the back — you've never seen a guy quite like that before. But the fact that you can identify an electrical outlet is an act of memory, as is the fact that you can say "man," "baseball cap," and "two immature eagle feathers."

If we encounter something that is truly without memory, we either feel afraid or we fail to see it. Canoeing alone in a northern Ontario lake, I once came upon a bizarre-looking object afloat in the water. It looked like the shoulder of a prehistoric animal. Initially, I was totally unnerved. Curiosity prevailed, however, and I poked at it with my paddle and discovered it was some kind of botanical water life. Yet, with no context (memory), I

didn't know if it was dangerous or harmless and I quickly paddled away.

Everything is narrative.

Narrative can only be understood through other narratives. Although each of us brings our own plethora of narratives to a "new" narrative we encounter, if it were an entirely new narrative in every respect, we would neither be able to write it nor would we be able to make sense of it as readers. Think of narrative as a triangle with the reader's pre-existing narratives forming one side, the writer's pre-existing narratives forming the other side, and the narrative the writer creates forming the base of the triangle. There must be enough correspondences among all three of these for a writer's narrative to circulate in a meaningful way. All three must collaborate with one another.

An example of what happens when this breaks down can be found in Gertrude Stein's writing. Despite Stein's genius, most readers (including most writers) have difficulty making sense of her writing. E.M. Forster suggests, in his book *Aspects of the Novel*, that the two central aspects of a novel are time and value; Stein's books failed to be widely read and understood because most of her narratives were written independent of time. Without time as the referent, most of us lose our contextual bearings, and meaning begins to unhinge. If we return to the image of the triangle, it's as if the base of the triangle (the new narrative written by the writer) falls open, and the collaboration between the writer and the reader becomes discontinuous.

All narratives build on other narratives.

Aristotle's definition of narrative being comprised of a beginning, a middle, and an end, continues to be our dominant narrative template. "Is a blade of grass a narrative?" I cannot be certain that it is, but I suspect it is familiar with narrative. A grass seed becoming a plant becoming a winter-dead blade may indeed enact this definition of narrative. Just as narratives build on narratives, blades depend on previous blades. Narrative appears to be imprinted on our souls and in every fibre of ourselves. How else

can we explain the fact that a bird raised in captivity since birth — having never heard its particular species' song — still knows how to sing it?

Our material is our memory.

Even when we invent, we use composite bits of memory from lived experience and from others' experiences that we have absorbed. Western society's concept of memory is predominantly that of it being quantifiable, factual, provable, rote. In fact, memory is far more fluid, intuitive, symbolic, associative, embodied, and codified. It is invested in and forms and alters the cells of our bodies. It is by its very nature metaphoric. In Patricia Hampl's insightful essay "Memory and Imagination," she writes:

We find, in our details and broken, obscured images, the language of symbol. Here memory impulsively reaches out and embraces imagination. That is the resort to invention. It isn't a lie, but an act of necessity, as the innate urge to locate truth always is.¹

Our body, our archive.

Scientific experiments reveal that we can only focus on 10 percent of the stimulation within and around us at any given moment. This extreme selectivity necessitates that our memory functions in a metaphoric manner. A recent study illustrated that we remember far more than we are conscious of remembering. Individuals were asked to enter a room and look around and exit. They were then asked to list everything they noticed (remembered) from the room. Then they were hypnotized and asked again to write down everything they had noticed. This time they remembered two to three times more. For example, although they did not remember a newspaper in their first list, while under hypnosis they not only remembered it, but recalled the name and date of the newspaper. If we juxtapose this research with another study that determined that 90 percent of our communication with one another happens nonverbally, we realize just how formidable and fascinating our task is when we work with the materials of memory and language to

construct narrative.

The concept of universality is a framework that requires us to believe that art is hallmarked by its universal resonance and appeal. Universality has influenced our belief that only one version can be the true version, the true story. Multiple points of view are regarded with suspicion at best. I call this mono vision “the authorized version.” It authorizes, in turn, which narratives are and are not allowed. The authorized version often prevents non-authorized narratives from even being written.

While minoring in history at university, I was taken aback when I realized that the factual account of World War II in North American history books is not the only authorized version. Fact-based, historical accounts of World War II were published in Germany, Japan, Russia, France, Italy, England, The Netherlands, Poland — each have their own authorized version. What has circulated and been taught as historical fact in North America is only one of numerous diverse, even contradictory, authoritative accounts — yet each of these historical, nonfiction narratives still assume a singular authority.

To understand the concept of the authorized version, we need to consider that our family’s relationship to its authorized story is routinely passed on to its extended family as well as the communities it is involved in. Typically, one person is the editor and shaper of the authorized version about the family and each of its members. Most often this is a parent. Sometimes it is another relative, such as a grandparent. The authorized version about the family is emphatically maintained. When a different version is suggested (god forbid if it’s suggested by an in-law!), this alternate version is belittled, ignored, or rejected through arguments, punishing silences, verbal (and even physical) attacks, and feuds lasting for decades.

The authorized version is a functional necessity.

It binds people together; it can short-circuit endless debate so that we can function on a daily basis in a practical manner. As writers, however, it is imperative we question the impact the authorized version has on our writing, for it dulls and limits a fiction writer as

much as it does a memoirist or poet. It is a kind of narrative death: it necessitates thoughtless inaccuracies, tedious stereotypes, unexamined lies. Particularly when working with autobiographical material, it is our desire to discover — to understand what we have not yet understood — that drives us to write. It is these very revelations and renovations that give the narrative its vitality and virtue.

A glimpse of the range of possible perspectives is illustrated in what I have come to call “the scene of the accident.” Imagine there is an automobile collision at a busy city street intersection. Everyone near the intersection will agree that an accident just happened. Even those looking in another direction will have heard it, assuming they are not deaf. Agreement soon changes to disparity when each person is asked “what happened?” These conflicting accounts are engendered by literal different points of view. Further amplifying these different accounts is the fact that everyone arrives at the scene with their own related experiences already in place, different “memory banks” upon which they draw. As writers, it is crucial to keep in mind this notion of the scene of the accident in order to render points of view and perception with integrity, accuracy and transparency.

The same cup is not the same cup.

Unless there are shared or similar contexts, the particularities of lived experience will not be universally understood by our readers. Even when we think it safe to assume that we are sharing the same narrative, we are not. If I were to hold up my cup or mug in a café and ask those sitting around me to describe the mug *exactly as they each see it*, some descriptions would include a handle. Others would not (because they cannot see the handle), while some would focus on the pattern on the side, and some would perhaps describe a glimpse of the interior of the mug — as I’m holding it slightly tipped — while others might glimpse the mug’s bottom as I tip it forward.

Although there are collective narratives, many more of our narratives are personal, or a blend of personal and collective. We tend to be most alert and anxious about point of view when writing autobiographically based (where it’s evident to the reader that the

narrative is based on personal experience), or autobiographically generated narratives (where the source of the narrative is not particularly evident), or narratives about people we know. Most writers, when working with such narratives, are keenly aware of their potential to illicit hurt and anger in those who shared the experience. As we have seen above, we will not only see and remember things differently, but we render them differently from one another. It is always a risk to transform the private and the intimate into the public.

As writers, we know that our perspectives are limited. We can, however, write with conviction and eloquence when we realize that we write from one corner of a any given narrative intersection; it is not possible to see the entire picture. Truth is, at best, complex, faceted, partial. With the passage of time, we can alter the previous versions of our memories within ourselves. The knowledge that truth can never be fully known is liberating; it has freed many writers to write some of their most arresting, resonant narratives.

As readers, however, we can be seduced by the notion of a true story (confession, gossip); by the sweep of the omnipotent voice. With this in mind, I usually encourage writers to “cue the reader” that their narratives are not the whole story. If you are working with characters or different perspectives/personas, you can easily do this through evoking their different, even opposing, perceptions. With my poetry and prose narrative *The Bat Had Blue Eyes*, I first learned about writing from the scene of the accident, about how to indicate that the central personages sharing the same story had either forgotten it, had little memory of it, or had died: they could neither corroborate nor dispute my own narrative. I quietly cued the reader that this was not, nor could it ever be, the whole story.

Note:

1. Patrica Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 31.