

## 2 Using Multiple Voices in Autobiographical Writing

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An old black and white photo, stuck at one corner to the bottom of the drawer. I ease it out carefully, not to tear it. Its shiny surface is covered in tiny cracks, but the picture's still quite clear. As I gaze at it, my heart starts beating painfully. All those faces, once so intimately, so intensely known.

This is how I begin my autobiographical project. It's an altogether conventional opening, in which the usual duality of I and me is clearly apparent. I, the narrator, speak from within my adult subjectivity, about the object of that discourse, the childish me, remembered by, and within the terms of, that subjectivity. A wide gulf of time separates this I and this me. I, in the context of now, speak with the concerns and perspectives of the contemporary social world. To the child I was, such ways of seeing things were completely unavailable. Yet my remembering of my past life is necessarily imbued with contemporary understandings. As Fischer-Rosenthal (2000) remarks, recalled events carry the stamp of the present. And these understandings do not just cover the particular focuses, issues, directions of concern to which our present-day culture ascribes significance. They also, as Ken Plummer (1995) has illustrated in the context of sexual narratives, define what stories are worth telling, and in what kind of discourse they should be told.

Probably no one now would claim an autobiography to represent an accurate record of past events. The past is a foreign country, to quote L.P. Hartley. Or, in the phrase of Esther Salaman (1970), we are all exiles from our past. But perhaps even beyond the fundamental problem of part-estrangement from our earlier lives, the very project of autobiography, as it has generally been defined, carries its own further kinds of distortion. I am thinking of the kind of definition offered by Phillippe Lejeune (1989). In his words, 'Autobiography is a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.' Or, as John Sturrock (1993) puts it, more ironically, 'The autobiographical hero rises and in order to do so, breaks ranks with the stage army of the anonymous, or that undifferentiated human mass whose members may be assumed to have no story.' The masculine language in both extracts is not accidental, I think.

This paradigm of autobiography, which until quite recently has generally prevailed, has clear implications for how such stories should be constructed. The aim is to show life as a series of events all having the same direction, all leading up, consequentially, to the contemporary self – a story of 'how I came

to be me'. As Adrian Sisman (2001) puts it, 'we cling to facts that seem to indicate the direction we have followed, and forget those that seem to undermine it.' Of course this calls for a huge degree of narrative smoothing. A sense of the discontinuities, contradictions, untidiness of real life goes by the board. And it is the fundamental questioning of the very terms of Lejeune's definition, by feminists, social constructionists and post-modernists, which surely demands some rethinking of the whole autobiographical project.

The 'story of personality', previously seen as unproblematic, is scarcely viable now. Essentialist notions of single, stable identities have been undermined by postmodernist insistence on fluidity, contradiction and heterogeneity in subject positions. The idea of inherent and life-long personal traits can no longer sit with the recognition of the discursive construction of social realities. And the masculinist possessive individualism of traditional approaches has itself been called into question by feminist thinkers. Isabelle Bertaux (1981), for instance, found that men and women talked rather differently about their lives. As she describes it, the men she interviewed considered the life they had lived as their own possession, whereas her women interviewees characteristically spoke of themselves in relation with others.

All these concerns seem to call for a different way of writing autobiographically. And, to my mind, they put into question the use of a single narrative voice. I'd like to illustrate how I've adopted a polyvocal mode of writing, in an attempt to circumvent some of the problems I've been describing.

I want to start with the question of the typical cultural gulf between the narrating I and the narrated me. If autobiographical writers are seeking to show how the past led up to the present, then this dictates the content to be written. It should consist of events and experiences which in retrospect are seen to have developmental significance for the writer's present-day self. This claimed relation between I and me justifies the contemporary I as the sole speaker. That adult voice is, after all, owning the life being described, because it is seen as a rudimentary part of the self who tells the story. The then is co-opted to the now, adduced as testimony for today's meanings. It makes sense, in these terms, that the experience is told at second hand, and described, rather than directly conveyed.

But what if autobiography is defined differently? Suppose the past is seen, not as a path leading towards the present, but as a series of moments, each having its own particular, immanent, independent meaning? This is the position I have tried to take in writing about my own youthful past. Although in launching my story I could not escape a conventional way of beginning, my subsequent account followed a different kind of logic. This entailed an attempt to conflate the I and the me, by speaking, as far as I could, in the voice of the child or adolescent whose experience was the focus. And the same logic required that the choice of content was dictated by its contemporary

significance for the young person herself. So, though other parts of the text are in the past tense, these first person passages speak in the present.

Here is a passage in which I speak at age four: the earliest age at which I felt I could speak in this way.

I hate this dress. It's tight round my neck. And it doesn't have proper sleeves, only funny little bunchy things at the top of my arms. Gill's is the same, only hers is blue and white stripes, and mine is pink and white stripes.

"Oh, there, hold still, Nicola, don't wriggle about like that!"

She ties my hair into bunches. The ribbon's slippery, she has to wind it round twice. She pulls very tight, it hurts in lots of places.

### **At Eight**

Slowly my needle draws lines, one after another. Very close together, not quite touching. Black against the bright red mushroom. The wool isn't completely black, it's sort of a purply blue. It doesn't really go with the navy blue sock. But it's the nearest match Aunt Vera could find in her patchwork bag.

When I turn for the ends, the lines go all limp and muddled, before I hold the sock more tightly. Not too tight though, not to pull on the stitches.

That's all the up-down lines. I hold it away a little, to see if anything's wrong. One of the lines is sticking up. Very gently I pull on the next-door one, then the one after that, then the next, which is the last. Till they're all lying straight and flat. You have to be very careful. Now for the best part, threading in the across lines, under and over. Till it makes a pattern of tiny little squares, with points of red in the middle of all of them.

### **At Thirteen**

I'm sitting on the grass under the chestnut tree, leaning against the trunk and reading *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Suddenly I hear Will calling down from an upstairs window, and I realise he's been calling me for some time.

"Nicola, you twerp, are you deaf? You're wanted inside."

I wait for him to say where. In the galley or on the bridge or in the focsle, I hope it's not the focsle, I can never remember where that is. But he shouts that Uncle Ernest wants me, so it's the study, and that isn't called anything else.

### **And at Seventeen**

As soon as you open the door there's a great noise of chattering. Both the studies are noisy. They shouldn't really be called studies, because hardly anyone in them is doing any studying. They're nearly all Americans here, and they only come because it's co-ed. They all chew chewing gum, you often find a piece stuck under the table.

I go into the one with a place for me. Mr Lomax doesn't look up, he's reading. And frowning at all the noise. I can tell he hates having to teach all the Americans, they aren't interested in what he teaches. And he's supposed to keep them quiet. Sometimes he gets up and comes out of his glass cubicle, and says something stern. They go quiet for a few minutes and then it all starts again.

In traditional terms, the content of these episodes is often quite trivial. They are generally slight, rather than expressing momentous events. They do not add up, in total, to any sequential account of personal development, of the gradual evolving of personality. Instead, they represent what Virginia Woolf (1978) called 'moments of being': details, intense singularities and particulars. To arrive at these moments, I have been involved in the process which, in his book *Troublesome Boy*, Harold Rosen (1993) describes: 'I have roamed about in the depths of my past and grubbed up fragments which speak to me.'

The moments I remember, or half-remember, are, in Esther Salaman's words, 'like scenes lit up by sheets of summer lightning as one speeds by in a train.' These memories, or apparent memories, come saturated with feeling, and it is through those feelings, it seems, that I have access to them. They are joyous moments, or painful, or embarrassing. Whichever they are, it is the mood tone which marks them. My aim has been to express, as far as I could, that tone, as it was invested in concrete detail. I have wanted to conjure up, as intimately as I could, the actual texture of my experience. And to do so, it seemed necessary to adopt the voice of my younger self, as far as I could recapture it. Language is evocative, it carries its own particular taste. Or, to change the metaphor, and quote Michael Bakhtin, words have the smell of the places where they've been used. And my childish language, which expressed and framed my experience then, represents a kind of key to the way it felt at the time.

But the singular, first person voice of a young I/me seemed inadequate fully to convey the experience I wanted to tell. We are all profoundly social, and live in relation with others. It is not merely that my story is peopled by other individuals. It is also that their subjectivities impinged on mine, just as mine necessarily impinged on theirs. The self that I was in childhood and adolescence was a self created in mutuality, through daily interchanges with the adults and other children with whom I lived. To quote Bakhtin again, 'In becoming aware of myself I attempt to look at myself through the eyes of another person.' 'I' was the person I was known to be by my significant others. My self was also other: 'I' was also 'she'. Just as, in some sense, I knew how my Nanna, my Aunt Vera, my uncle saw things, had assimilated their perspectives, so, in writing about my younger self, it seemed necessary to speak as them, with their voices. My story, like my self, had to have permeable boundaries.

Among the various voices I have interwoven into my text, there is the voice of a much loved elderly caretaker:

No use contradicting her, never was. Always did know best. Take it all with a pinch of salt, that's the way to manage. Going to the farm every day, where's the harm in that? They learn about things, don't they, watching it all, she ought to see that, she's always wanting children to learn. Break their little hearts, it would, stopping them going there. Well, she's not to know, is she.

But sending little, Gillian away, whoever heard of that, a child of six! Mind, she sent all her own sons away to school, all seven of them, but not as young as that, not at six! And then carting Nicola off to visit some expensive doctor, all the way to London! Nothing wrong with the child, to my mind, she's just thin, some children are.

### **A Disliked Aunt, Aunt Ethel**

'This room could double up as her bedroom. The put-u-up would go over there, by the window'. She began to plan.

Of course the girls ought to be with her now, helping her decide what should go where. But they'd both shown a total lack of interest throughout the whole proceedings. They'd had to be almost dragged to furnishing shops, and once there, had acted as though the choices to be made were no concern of theirs.

"But it's going to be **your** room, Gill!" she'd yelled at the girl, finally exasperated. "You **must** know what kind of curtains you want!"

But Gill had merely shrugged her shoulders in that infuriating way of hers.

Nicky wasn't quite so sullen. But she'd shown no more enthusiasm than her sister when decisions were called for.

"I don't mind, honestly" was the most you could get out of her.'

### **My Mother**

She took another draught of comforting smoke. What were they like? You couldn't tell much from photos, even polyphotos. They both looked so posed. Gill was sturdy, you could see that; her lovely baby had grown well. Nicky was thinner. Nicky, whom she'd scarcely known. And yet, strangely, it was to Nicky that she felt closer. The long confiding letters, sometimes with her funny little drawings. Gill's letters were different. She never responded to anything. It almost seemed as though she did not read her mother's letters, although surely that could not be true ...

These voices offer a different perspective on things to the one expressed by my own young voice. Quite often, though, the events they describe do not involve me. As a child, I came to know a lot about the lives of intimate others, much of which, of course, lay outside their relations with me.

But there are other, contextual features of experience which do not lend themselves to any one particular voice. Physical landscape, for instance. This seems to call for a more distant, less personal telling.

A few feathery flakes drift down, weightless, out of a slate-grey sky. Slowly the dim air darkens, as gathering clusters blot out distance. All the features of the landscape, its woods, its fells, its farm outbuildings, gradually melt into one blurred unity. Sheep, vague, greyish forms, huddle mutely together under the laden branches of a pine. A great soft blanket lies upon the earth, rendering secret the lives of all.

More difficult is the question of how to render the whole social and cultural context which, invisibly but fundamentally, shapes our human lives. As David Plath (1988) has put it, 'We go about shaping ourselves into persons after the vision of our group's heritage'. No experience is really understandable in isolation from its context. In traditional tellings, the historical setting is typically discussed at some length, not merely as a backdrop, but as enabling an understanding of what took place at the time. In keeping with their focus on the contemporary present, these accounts necessarily involve hindsight. But in terms of my own intention to avoid retrospective understandings, this will not do. It was the song writer, Leonard Cohen, (1988) who remarked 'That was in the 60s. But we didn't know it was the 60s then, we thought it was just ordinary time'.

Yet a single personal voice - a voice from the past, the time at issue - does not seem adequate either. Like the air we breathe, our culture remains largely invisible to us. No one person from my young world can possibly be used as a spokesperson for their time and place. In the case of momentous collective events, heavily inscribed with historical meanings, I have resorted to a biblical voice, because of its timelessness, its grandeur, and its lack of moorings in human particularity. Here is that voice speaking of an episode during World War Two.

Now there were dwelling in another country a man named Martin and his wife Annaliese, and their daughter Renata. And Martin and Annaliese cast secretly about, how they should save their daughter from the evil men who would cast them into prison. And they bethought them of a plan, that they might send Renata away, to the land where dwelt Henrietta and Vera, to live in safety among them. And thus it came to pass. But Martin and Annaliese did not escape their enemies, and they were cast into a terrible dungeon, which was called Golgotha.

My autobiographical project has involved a kind of collage. In place of the usual continuous narrative, my text has been discontinuous and heterogeneous, involving juxtapositions and shifts of discourse. As actually conveying my own young experience, it probably falls short. But if it suggests that there are

other ways of telling personal experience, then it will have served some purpose.

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