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A Narrative Logic of the Personal Essay

by Bruce Ballenger

In 2011, Dr. Michael Shannon, a California pediatrician, was driving his SUV on the Pacific Coast highway when he was "t-boned" by a semi. The SUV, pinned under the truck, burst into flames with Shannon trapped inside. Fortunately, firefighters from Paramedic Engine 29 were at the scene in minutes. They doused the burning car with fire retardant, and using the jaws of life the firefighters dramatically rescued the doctor as the flames were licking around his feet and legs. Among Shannon's rescuers was a paramedic, Chris Trokey, who, it turns out, was Dr. Shannon's patient thirty years earlier. Trokey was born prematurely, weighing a mere three pounds, and the prognosis was grim— a fifty percent chance of survival. Dr. Shannon spent days caring for the infant "round the clock," the very same child who later grew up to return the favor years later on a California highway, part of the team that saved the physician's life. "It's amazing to watch them all grow up," said Shannon, "but to have one come back in your life, on a day you really need it, that's incredible."[1] If this was fiction would it be a good story? That was the question that my colleague, the novelist Brady Udall, asked his graduate workshop recently, and everyone agreed that this story would be terrible fiction. Why? Because causality—not coincidence—is at the heart of narrative logic: Something happens and a narrator feels some stake in examining why it happened or what the consequences might be.

Causal logic is fundamental to all storytelling in both true and imagined stories, and the absence of causal logic is often where the narratives of novice writers run aground. Brian, a student in my introductory creative nonfiction class, often wrote about raft trips. I've followed him down the churning South Fork of the Boise River and over a waterfall on the Lochsa. He wrote about the thunder of rapids in a narrow canyon and dodging "boat cutters," rocks in midstream that threaten to

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shred a rubber raft. Brian wrote about all of these things but I didn't really know why, and so in conference I gently prodded him: "What is it you're trying to understand about your river trips?" He seemed puzzled by the question. Brian, like many developing essayists, brought with him a simple faith in story: If the memory is rendered powerfully enough, then it will be affecting. Unfortunately, this is never quite enough.

For many years, I have used Vivian Gornick's famous distinction between a "situation and a story" to help writers like Brian understand the problem he needed to solve. "The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot," she writes. "The story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say."[2] Brian's rafting trips were situations, but what was his motive in sharing them? What did he hope to explore in the retelling?

Causal logic helps writers to see where these questions originate. It's never enough to simply have events to write about. It is in the examination of the *reasons for* and the *consequences of* the things that happen to us that give rise to stories. But so many things happen to us. How do we know what is the most fertile ground for us to explore as writers? Narrative logic always works in relationship to a *significant* event, something that happened that the writer senses has unsettled meaning. For example, in "Devil's Bait," one of the essays in Leslie Jameison's collection *The Empathy Exams*, the significant event is a small conference of Morgellon's sufferers the essayist attends at a small Baptist Church in Austin, Texas.[3] For E.B White in "Once More to the Lake," the occasion for story is when he revisits his boyhood summer haunt in Maine with his own.[4] The significant event in James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son" is his father's funeral.[5] Of course, there are events in Brian's essays, too, but their meanings aren't called into question; they aren't significant events

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but simply things that happened that he thought were dramatic and interesting. Returning to Gornick's distinction, Brian wrote about *situations* on his river trips but struggled to find the story. Of course, this isn't just a struggle for novice writers. As we draft material, we are all on the scent of a significant event around which we might build a story. Narrative logic clarifies the problem: What we seek are the events with the most compelling causal complications.

One of the commonplaces I've always found particularly annoying is that "everything happens for a reason." The implication, I think, is that we need not interrogate the events of our lives because the universe operates on its own logic, and we'd best accept it. This is a logic that works nicely as an explanation for Dr. Shannon's rescue on the Pacific Coast Highway by the man he saved thirty years earlier. What caused this coincidence to happen? Fate? Divine Providence? Such explanations work badly as stories in contemporary literary fiction, Brady Udall argues, and I don't think they work in narrative nonfiction either, or at least they don't work if writers choose to explore the *reasons* the world acted on them in mysterious ways. Consequences are another matter entirely. For example, I could easily see a story arise from Dr. Shannon's experience after the accident as he examines its meaning in his life. The same might apply to his rescuer. The implication here is that while anything can be a significant event for writers, including inexplicable ones, the most promising is an event that involves human agency, one in which *both* causes and consequences are fair game for story.

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The narrative logic I've described so far is focused on causality. But there's a key element missing: time. We always tell stories in relationship to time. Often we think about a story's internal structure—it has a beginning, middle, and end—as its essential temporal feature, or we consider its setting: something happened at a particular time

and place. But I think narrative logic provides a more precise way of thinking about this.

Story time is calibrated to when the significant event occurred. Writers move back and forth in time from the thing that happened in an effort to explore their questions of reasons or consequence. In "Notes of a Native Son," Baldwin is largely interested in the consequences of his father's death, especially as they are set against the Harlem riots that coincided with it. "When his life had ended I began to wonder about that life," writes Baldwin, "and also, in a new way, to be apprehensive about my own."[6] E.B. White is also interested in consequences, prompting him to speculate what returning to the lake might feel like: "On the journey over to the lake I began to wonder what it would be like. I wondered how the time would have marred this unique, this holy spot."[7] Joan Didion's "Dreamers of the Golden Dream" is an examination of reasons—why would Lucille Miller, a woman who would seem to have the life that she wanted, burn her husband alive in the family Volkswagen?[8] More often, however, essays examine *both* causes and consequences. In "Devil's Bait," Jameison wonders what might explain what seems to some the shared delusion of Morgellons's sufferers that there are mysterious things—fibers, worms, particles—emerging from just under their skin? But she's most keenly interested in the effects of the disease, not just on its victims but on those of us who, like Jameison, feel empathetic towards Morgellons sufferers even if we may not believe in the "reality" of their disease.

One of the most basic decisions writers make about how to structure their stories is where to locate the significant event in the narrative. When we informally tell stories to people this often isn't even a question. The big reveal comes at the end. But when we craft stories with causal relationships in mind, then chronology may not be the best structure. E.B. White's much anthologized essay "Death of a Pig" follows its title with a lead

paragraph that confirms the significant event around which he builds the essay: "I spent several days and nights in mid-September with an ailing pig and I feel driven to account for this stretch of time, more particularly since the pig died last night, and I lived, and things might easily have gone the other way round and one left to do the accounting."[9]

Narrative logic provides an explanation for why White began this way. He was primarily interested in exploring the consequences of this unfortunate event, and so it makes sense to foreground it so he could get on with the work of examining those meanings. Unfortunately, whether the question driving the essay is one of cause or consequence isn't always a good guide to structure (Didion's "Dreamers of the Golden Dream," for example, an essay that focuses largely on cause, places the burning Volkswagen incident in the first four pages of the narrative). But each question does direct the writer's gaze to certain parts of his experience and not others. As Annie Dillard once famously said, the key decision in crafting nonfiction is "what to put in and what to leave out."[10] Questions of consequence obviously place the emphasis on what happened after the significant event. Questions of cause make the events leading up to the significant event most important. Essays that take up both questions can go either way, or both ways. The key idea here is that the time structure of an essay is calibrated to the significant event, and guided by the question that is driving the essay, it moves forward from the event, goes back to what led up to it, or zig-zags back and forth.

Essayists build thought structures along with story structures. Unlike many fiction writers who focus on creating stories that render experience, essayists want to both render experience *and* discover its possible meanings, and this requires a structure that also encourages reasoning. In general, the logic of the essay is inductive—writers examine the particulars of their experience

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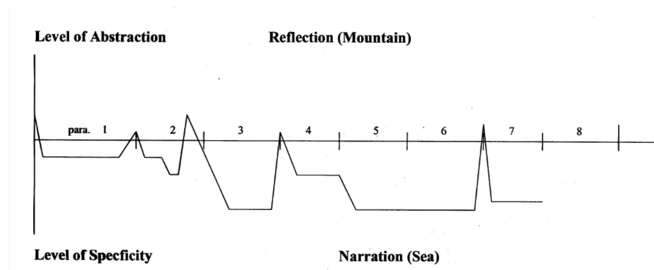
looking for patterns of meaning—but what are the thought structures that actively encourage this? The first key element of such a structure is the causal question that motivates writers to explore their subject in the first place. Eileen Pollack writes that the “interplay between the central question that guides the writer’s research and the form that helps that write organize his or her findings is the living, breathing heart of creative nonfiction.”[11] It is the collision, Pollack argues, between the writer’s question and the relevant particulars of experience “that throws up meditative sparks.” The question may be elusive, of course. But narrative logic suggests that, for memoirists, the hunt begins by deciding what is the significant event—the thing that happened that has the most urgently-felt unsettled meanings. In essays like Jameison and Didion’s that involve reporting, the question arises from going into the world to seek it out.

The meaning-making machinery of the narrative essay not only helps writers generate insights but it can help refine and clarify the question at the heart of the work. It relies on inductive reasoning that is facilitated by a structure that works in several ways. One is a kind of dialogic thinking--the back and forth between the particular and the abstract, observations of and ideas about, what happened and what *happens*. As a structure we see this movement in essays as the difference between showing and telling, which we recognize as either narration (scene, description, anecdote, detail) or exposition. In fact, it’s possible to crudely visualize this structure by literally graphing the back and forth movement from the particular to the abstract in narrative nonfiction. For example, here’s my graph of the first seven paragraphs or so of Didion’s “Dreamer of the Golden Dream.”[12]



When I do this with much of Didion's work, what I often see are the very brief sparks of reflection, and then she quickly plunges back into narration. These reflections are often shatteringly powerful lines that resonate like a guitar string long after it's plucked. In "Dreamer's," for example, Didion writes about how the idea of California's possibilities intoxicated Lucille Miller like it did many of the migrants before her. In a sudden spike of insight, Didion writes that "the dream was teaching the dreamers how to live,"[13] a line that elegantly captures how Miller—and others like her—might have been led astray. Immediately after that passage the piece returns to narration. More polemical essays like Roxanne Gay's "How to Be Friends with Another Woman" may be largely expository with only break spikes of narration.[14] Personal essays can be located all over this continuum, and it provides a useful taxonomy for distinguishing between them.

As a diagnostic tool, a graph of the movement between narration and reflection can also reveal problems in a draft. Novice writers, for example, may focus all of their energies on telling a story, only to reflect briefly at the very end ("As I look back on this now, I realize that true friends are hard to find"), a situation that is obvious in a graph that spikes only in the last paragraph. It is this back and forth movement from showing to telling that is the drama of the personal essay, and its absence either prompts readers to ask the ques-

tion every essayist fears—"so what?"—or prompts boredom, something that essays with long stretches of exposition often risk.

In fiction, writers are urged to show don't tell. Essays do both, and for all its risks, it is in exposition that writers think through the meanings of what happened. This is possible because exposition is the language of thought. The theorist Richard Ohmann once pondered the injunction in style manuals and writing textbooks that the best prose is always concrete and specific, and he wondered whether this doesn't "push the student writer always toward the language that most nearly reproduces the immediate experience and away from the language that might be used to understand it, transform it, and relate it to everything else."[15] Though creative writers typically view abstraction with suspicion, essayists recognize its power to name the categories of experience in which their narratives fall, locate the ideas that seem most relevant, and recognize the patterns of meaning that lead to insight.

In a general way, the move to abstract in the personal essay is triggered by the nagging sense that the "so what?" question remains unanswered: Why am I telling this story about myself? But there is something subtler at work. Phillip Lopate writes that essays incorporate a "double perspective."[16] One attempts to render experience as it happened and the other draws "on the sophisticated wisdom of one's current self" to interpret the meaning of that experience. The logic behind these two perspectives is linked to time and point of view. In an essay there aren't just two perspectives but two narrators: the "now-narrator" and the "then-narrator," and it is the shifting back and forth between them that is an essential part of the dialectic that generates insight, that movement between what happened and what happens.

Over the years I tried to illustrate to my students how this method of reasoning about experience works by playing video clips of the 1980s televi-

sion program *The Wonder Years*. The show follows Kevin (Fred Savage) as he grows up in a suburban California neighborhood in the late sixties. Against the political turmoil of the time, Kevin's life is utterly ordinary: He tries to sort out his feelings about the girl across the street, attempts to understand his father's disillusionment with work, and adjusts to his sister's feminist awakening. What was significant about *The Wonder Years* as an example of storytelling was that it was the first television program to incorporate Lopate's dual perspectives, a structure that is now commonplace on TV shows. We have the narrative of Kevin's experience as a thirteen-year-old, recreated with the immediacy that makes viewers feel its power. But the script writers' innovation was the use of the voice of the adult Kevin, a narrator who introduces each story and then returns throughout the narrative to comment, interpret, and question what happened from the point of view of the present. In the absence of this adult narrator, *The Wonder Years* would have been a cute story but hardly memorable. With that narrator it was often poignant.

It isn't hard to introduce writing students to these two perspectives in their own work, something I've done with an exercise that often follows our viewing of *The Wonder Years*. I explain that the exercise will involve two five-minute episodes of writing, each in response to a prompt. The first prompt is this: Imagine a room you spent a lot of time in as a child. Put yourself back into that room, and using *the present tense* draw on your senses to write about everything that you see, hear, smell, and so on. For example, I might begin this way: "I am sitting at the small kitchen table in the narrow kitchen at my grandmother's house in Wheeling, Illinois. It is August. She stands hunched over the hot stove in a flowered apron, stirring the pasta sauce, and its rich, earthy smell hangs in the air. Through the narrow window next to her I can see a pear tree, and it's blooming…"

I urge students to fastwrite from this prompt, not compose, following the words rather than trying to muscle them into place. Typically, this writing generates a surprising amount of material. For the second prompt, I ask students to finish this sentence: "As I look back on this now, I realize that…" From there, I encourage them to *compose* a fat paragraph, this time thinking about what they say before they say it. We write again for about five minutes.

"How would you distinguish between each episode of writing?" I ask. This is a rich discussion that frequently helps clarify the difference between now- and then-narrators. Students often report that the initial prompt is richly detailed and emotionally charged while the second is more abstract, and often more difficult to write, though typically this where insights—if any—emerged. Obviously, the "Roomful of Details" artificially mimics the time shift—what happened and what happens—that is characteristic of the personal essay's dual perspective, and in doing so it also mimics the language of each as well: the sensory and expressive language of "showing" and the more reflective language of "telling." In other words, we have both Kevin's deployed to not just render experience but interpret it.

The narrative theorist Rick Altman argues that we know we're being told a story as soon as there is someone to follow, and in the personal essay we usually know who we are following immediately: the "I" who steps forward to speak about his or her experience.[17] Though this narrator may not register as a character until a few paragraphs into an essay, sometimes we sense it from the first line. George Orwell was a master at this. For example, "Shooting an Elephant" begins this way: "In Moulmein, in lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people—the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me."[18] But it isn't enough that an essay has an "I-character." The personal essay's narrative logic

also demands that it is also guided by a reasoning subject, a narrator who is also expected to explicitly manage the meanings that give the work its purpose. This means, of course, that most essayists are expected to say what they mean or show what they think (though lyric essays may lean more towards ambiguity). But personal essays make subtler demands on their narrators that may be more fundamental: an epistemological perspective that welcomes doubt, uncertainty, and skepticism.

I think this is the hardest thing to teach to novice essayists, most of whom are schooled in the academic essay, which is typically driven by a thesis. Doubt about its truthfulness—even if the writer is privately unsure—is masked by the force of argument. Obviously, the narrator of an academic essay is very different from the narrator of a personal essay—for one thing personal essays are more explicitly *personal*—but the difference is more profound than that. Unlike writers of arguments, essayists' hope, at best, for what Doug Hesse called "episodic knowledge"[19]: This is what I know *right now*. Who knows what I might think about this in a day, a week, or a year. Insight is always connected to a particular time and often particular place, and as a result becomes an event in the nonfiction narrative. The narrators of personal essays are receptive to these events, and even expect them, but they are at the same time always ready to interrogate whatever insights emerge, just as they would any other experience.

For example, a scene in "Devil's Bait" is set at the small Texas conference of Morgellon's sufferers, and Jameison writes about her conversation with Dawn, a nurse from Pittsburgh. When Dawn confesses that her greatest fear about the disease is that it will make it impossible for her to have relationships—"with scars and stuff that I have from this, what guy's gonna like me?"—Jameison writes that she strongly identifies with Dawn: "*I've felt that too*." Jameson writes, "Her condition seems like a crystallization of what I've always

felt about myself—a wrongness in my being that I could never pin or name, so I found things to pin it to: my body, my thighs, my face. The resonance is part of what compels me about Morgellons: it offers a shape for what I've often felt, a container or christening for a certain species of unease. Disease." But then Jameison suddenly disrupts this reading of herself: "My willingness to turn Morgellons into metaphor—as a corporeal manifestation of some abstract human tendency—is dangerous. It obscures the particular and unbidden nature of the suffering in front of me."[20]

Though Rick Altman wrote that "following" a character is the clearest signal to an audience that it is experiencing a story, what is unique about essayists is that they are always following themselves. They are keen spectators of the I-characters they create, hoping for the moments when they discover what they didn't know they knew. The great writing teacher Donald Murray, who celebrated surprise as "the writer's addiction," observed that a "writer sits down intending to say one thing and hears the writing say something more, or less, or completely different. The writing surprises, instructs, receives, questions, tells its own story, and the writer becomes the reader wondering what will happen next."[21] The receptivity to surprise is especially important in the personal essay, and this demands an openness to self-doubt and uncertainty that apprentice writers are unused to. But even more challenging, the essayist must be willing—as Jameison was—to look at her initial self-discoveries with skepticism.

As his student, Murray once told me that writers often keep telling the same story over and over, and essayists are particularly vulnerable to believing—and repeating—master narratives about themselves. For example, the theme of much of my early work was the story of the wronged son. I grew up with an alcoholic father who died when I was twenty-two, and for years much of what I wrote repeated that theme. Even a recent essay,

which is ostensibly about my habit of collecting manual typewriters, somehow arced back in the early drafts to those familiar old hurts. Fortunately, I was reminded by several astute readers that the narrators of personal essayists must always be deeply suspicious of their master narratives. Is this typewriter essay really about my father? It wasn't. One of the great challenges of writing essays is to not only discover the causal questions that drive the work, but to test the truthfulness of the insights that emerge, and to do this sometimes in front of readers.

The narrative logic of the personal essay hinges on a narrator who hopes to harvest self-knowledge but who also sees it as episodic, uncertain, and even contradictory. There's nothing novel about this. Michel de Montaigne, the first essayist, wrote more than 500 years ago that "could my mind find a firm footing, I should not be making essays, but coming to conclusions; it is however, always in its apprenticeship and on trial."[22] In the revisions of his *Essays*, published in subsequent editions, Montaigne rarely cut anything but instead simply added his latest thinking on a subject, even if it contradicted what was there. What we witness in reading the work, then, is a narrator whose perspectives aren't fixed to a particular place and time but that continuously evolve. Students often see this most clearly when they return to their essays in revision. Then time can work its magic, loosening the grip that earlier versions of themselves had on what they had to say in a draft. What we might teach them when they do return to the work is that this struggle towards self-understanding is part of the drama of the essay, too, and one of its greatest rewards.

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Notes

1. Rick Chambers and Tracy Bloom, "OC Paramedic Helps

Rescue Doctor Who Saved His Life as Baby; Pair Reunited," KTLA News, March 29, 2015, accessed August 2, 2016, KTLMarcktla.com/2015/03/29/oc-paramedic-helps-rescue-doctor-who-saved-his-life-as-baby-pair-reunited/.

2. Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001), p. 13.

3. Leslie Jameison, "Devil's Bait" in *The Empathy Exams* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014), pp. 27–56.

4. E.B. White, "Once More to the Lake" in *Essays of E.B. White* (New York: Harper & Row), pp. 197–202.

5. James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son." In *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985*, New York: St. Martin's, 1985, pp. 127–145.

6. Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," p. 128.

7. White, "Once More to the Lake," p. 197.

8. Joan Didion, "Dreamers of the Golden Dream," in *We Tell Ourselves Stories to Live: Collected Nonfiction* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2006), pp. 13–29.

9. E.B. White, "Death of a Pig," p. 17.

10. Annie Dillard, "To Fashion a Text," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), p. 141.

11. Eileen Pollack, "The Interplay of Form and Content in Creative Nonfiction," *The Writer's Chronicle* 39 (March–April 2007), p. 53.

12. One way I explain to students the movement between the specific and the abstract in the essay is to use a metaphor: the "sea of experience" and the "mountain of reflection." While in narration we swim in the sea of experience it's also necessary to seek the vantage point of the mountain where it's possible to see patterns. I warn students however, never to climb too high. Then the abstractions risk becoming clichés.

13. Didion, "Dreamers of the Golden Dream," p. 22.

14. Roxanne Gay, "How to be Friends with Another Woman," in Bad Feminist (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), pp. 47–50.

15. Richard Ohmann, "Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language," *College English 41* (Dec. 1979): p. 396.

16. Philip Lopate, "Reflection and Introspection: A Pedagogic Mystery Story," *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction 7* (Spring 2005): p. 145.

17. Rick Altman, *A Theory of Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008)

18. George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant," in *A Collection of Essays* (San Diego: Harvest, 1946), p. 148.

19. Doug Hesse, "Essays and Experience, Time and Rhetoric," in *Writing Theory and Critical Theory* ed. John Clifford and John Schilb, (New York: Modern Language Assoc.,

1994), p. 197.

20. Jameison, “Devil’s Bait,” pp. 32–33.

21. Donald Murrray, *A Writer Teaches Writing* (Boston: Thompson/Heinle, 2004), p. 7.

22. Michel de Montaigne, “On Repentance,” in *Essays*, translated by J. M. Cohen (New York: Penguin, 1968), p. 235.