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English 524

Whole Self or Half? Me or It?: The Author in the Essay

I cannot fix my subject. He is always restless, and reels with a natural intoxication. I catch him here, as he is at the moment when I turn my attention to him. I do not portray his being; I portray his passage; not a passage from one age to another or, as the common people say, from seven years to seven years, but day to day, from minute to minute. I must suit my story to the hour, for soon I may change, not only by chance but also by intention...Could my mind find a firm footing, I should not be making essays, but coming to conclusions; it is, however, always in apprenticeship and on trial. (Montaigne 235)

The first person singular is too narrow a gate for the whole writer to squeeze through. What we meet on the page is not the flesh-and-blood author, but a simulacrum, a character who wears the label *I*. (Sanders 201)

I have to tell the story of myself in order to sense a self at all. (Mairs 114)

Personal essayists...have been fascinated with the changeableness and plasticity of the materials of human personality. Starting with self-description, they have realized they can never render all at once the entire complexity of a personality. So they have elected to follow an additive strategy, offering incomplete shard, ... If "we must remove the mask," it is only to substitute another mask. The hope is that in the end, when an essayist's life has been accumulated, all these personae will add up to a genuine unmasking...The harvesting of self-contradiction is an intrinsic part of the personal essay form. (Lopate xxxviii-xxix)

The essayist arises in the morning and, if he has work to do, selects his garb from an unusually extensive wardrobe: he can pull on any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter— philosopher, scold, jester, raconteur, confidant, pundit, devil's advocate, enthusiast. (White vii)

But while "we" are gratified, "I," that unruly partner in the human fellowship, is reduced to despair. "I" must always think things for himself, and feel things for himself. To share them in a diluted form with the majority of well-educated and well-intentioned men and women is for him sheer agony; and while the rest of us listen intently and profit profoundly, "I" slips off to the woods and the fields and rejoices in a single blade of grass or a solitary potato. (Woolf 385)

I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends. We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. (Didion 139)

In light of the essay's history, subjectivity, for example, becomes a political issue if we view the expressed presence of a subject—most often an explicitly present narrative “I” — in terms of the problem of author/authority. Whatever else may be claimed about the essay as a democratic form, as a rebellious response to the rigidity of the dogmatic tracts that preceded it and to which it responded, it is also true that Montaigne left the public world in which he had been prominent to write his essays and based them on the authority of his experience in that world. Experience is indeed the/an authorizing force in the essay. And what sorts of experiences do women call upon? Are they different from the usual experiences called upon in the essay?...How do women essayists mark their specifically gendered voice within the generically masculine form? (Joeres and Mittman, Politics of the Essay, 18)

Since Marx and Freud, discovering one's point of view has come to mean discovering what determines it. (Kauffman 69)

As the example of Montaigne makes clear, [the essay] is the medium not only of self-revelation, but also of self-revision. (Kauffmann 81)

The simple nonfiction equation:

I=Author

More complicated variations:

I=Persona=Author (White)

I<Author (Sanders)

I reveals author to herself (Didion, Mairs)

Author authorizes I (Joeres and Mittman)

Social=I=Author

So what? How does theorizing the self benefit us as essayists or literary critics or writing teachers? The drama of one's personality depends, after all, on the *dramatis personae* one is capable of performing. I don't mean to imply that every personal essayist is, or need be, multivoiced. But I do believe that the myth of a singular and unchanging voice has tended to distort the perception and understanding of personal essays and essayists. And it may also have subverted instruction in the writing of personal essays. How many teachers of writing, I wonder, invite their students to produce essays in which they play a variety of roles, put on a variety of shirts, speak in a variety of voices? How many even invite them to try out different voices in different essays? How many invite them to write personal essays that are true to the range and richness of their actual voices? (Klaus, *The Made-Up Self*, 58)

The idea is to get away from fiction's narrative presentation of character and get closer to memoir's reflection presentation of self. I think memoir is differentiating itself from fiction because it has to evolve as its own literary form. Autobiography first, the memoir now, have grown out of and away from the storytelling of myth, epic, and fiction. Memoir is individualizing, self-actualizing, if you like, finding its personality while still sharing some of the style and rhetoric of fiction. Moreover, the memoirist seeks to know himself by individualizing that self—but not for the ego alone. (Larsen, *The Memoir and the Memoirist* 162)