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Writer-as-narrator: Engaging the debate around the (un)reliable narrator in memoir and the personal essay

Abstract

Subjective and personal forms of nonfiction writing are enjoying exponential popularity in English language publishing currently, as an interested public engages with 'true' stories of society and culture. Yet a paradox exists at the centre of this form of writing. As readers, we want to know who the writer is and what she has to tell us. Yet as writers we use a persona, a constructed character, a narrator who is only partially the writer, to deliver the narrative. How is a writer able to convey 'true' stories that are inherently reliant on memory, within a constructed narrative persona?

We find a 'gap' between the writer and the narrator/protagonist on the page, an empowered creative space in which composition occurs, facilitating a balance between the facts and lived experiences from which 'true' stories are crafted, and the acknowledged fallibility of human memory. While the gap between writer and writer-as-narrator provides an enabling space for creative composition, it also creates space for the perception of unreliability. The width of this gap, we argue, is crucial. Only if the gap is small, if writer and writer-as-narrator share a set of passionately held values, can the writer-as-narrator become a believable entity, satisfying the reader with the 'truth' of their story. Keywords: first-person creative nonfiction, reliable narrator, writer-as-narrator

Introduction

This paper has arisen from the authors' collaborative development of a creative nonfiction course within a university writing program. We have, however, unearthed more than we originally intended in our exploration of first-person creative nonfiction. Our initial focus was on the personal essay, and out of this grew a need to more clearly identify the voice of the writer, the resonance of what was being conveyed, and the capacity of that voice to engage an audience. As certain kinds of extended essays quite readily morph into the longer memoir form, this expanded our examination into first-person creative nonfiction narrative. We searched for demonstrable techniques to empower writers (both beginning and experienced) to establish a reliable voice that would enable a perception of 'truth' in storytelling within the acknowledged fallibility of memory and the art of composition.

Within personal nonfiction, we have identified links between an authorial voice of narrative storytelling that engages and holds the attention of readers, and the

consciousness of the ‘I’ telling that story. The delight of writing first-person creative nonfiction comes not only from utilising its creative storytelling capacity to work with the raw material of real events, experiences and memories. It is also in the development of a narrative persona capable of subtlety and reflection (a filter for the writer’s experience), a persona who is immersed in the construction of the journey and able to express the resonance of its purpose. Philip Gerard endorses creative nonfiction and its energy in this way: ‘Nonfiction often achieves its momentum not just through narrative – telling the story – but also through the meditative intelligence behind the story, the author as narrator thinking through the implications of the story, sometimes overtly, sometimes more subtly’ (Gerard 2005: 267).

Part of the issue of narrative truth telling and the fallibility of memory is the scope of personal nonfiction and the potential for ambiguity in the narrator’s voice. Nancy Mairs suggests personal nonfiction contains an ‘implicit contract’ between writer and reader. When she labels a particular work ‘nonfiction’, she expects readers will infer that what she describes ‘really did happen; these people actually live, or at least did once; I really believe in the idea I put forth, or at least did once’ (Mairs 2008: 89). For Mairs, the creativity of her nonfiction stories is in her composition, her use of language. She is writing from the actual as touchstone rather than the imaginary. Her writing, she believes, is honest: it contains no ‘falsehoods’. Yet, she concedes, ‘there are secrets; and these, I suppose, twist the truth in ways I don’t even recognize’ (2008: 91). First person nonfiction, according to Phillip Lopate, traditionally encourages readers to ‘regard the narrator, whatever else his flaws, as reliable, sincerely attempting to level with us’ (Lopate 2013: 12). Vivian Gornick defines memoir as ‘a tale taken from life – that is, from actual, not imagined, occurrences – related by a first person narrator who is undeniably the writer’ (Gornick 2003). The writer and narrator are strongly interlinked and closely aligned, even when playing creatively with themes and composition.

This paper focuses on the first-person creative nonfiction forms, the memoir and personal essay, to explore the importance of the writer’s positioning and use of the intimate voice. At the core of this exploration is one of the most difficult elements of first-person creative nonfiction writing. This is the potential tension between personalised, reflective chronicling of factual events and concepts, and the capacity of the resulting narrative to transform experience into resonant storytelling.

Hybridity of creative nonfiction forms

Scoping creative nonfiction and its development is a fascinating exercise. In her introduction to *The best American essays 2003*, Anne Fadiman writes of the essay as running along a ‘journalistic – academic spectrum’ (Fadiman 2003: xvii). A definition of the form becomes a movable feast. Creative nonfiction has been characterised in multiple ways since it evolved from a conflation of the curiosity and investigative research skills of the journalist with the creative writing techniques and practices of the literary fiction writer in the 1960s in an attempt to tell stories rather than to report events. This portmanteau or hybrid form of writing has been moving, slipping even, through a range of categories or labels as it has become more extensively published.

A breadth of writing forms has been included under the creative-nonfiction writing umbrella: literary or narrative nonfiction, imaginative nonfiction, lyric nonfiction, the lyric or personal essay, personal narrative and literary memoir. From the perspective of Laurel Tarulli’s Cataloguing Librarian blog, creative

nonfiction is a hit-and-miss category if one seeks reading material via a search engine using the term. Tarulli's list of related searchable categories delivering creative nonfiction titles is: 'True adventure', 'Travelogue', 'True Crime', 'Biography/Autobiography', 'History', 'Micro History', 'Essays', 'Memoir' and 'Reporting' (Tarulli 2008).

Canada's Creative Nonfiction Collective finds the label 'creative nonfiction' troublesome, beginning their definition with characteristics that are the antithesis or obverse of creative nonfiction of the form: 'technical or instructional works, conventional newspaper reportage, and nonfiction work characterised by a neutral (so-called objective) third person perspective' (CNFC nd). What creative nonfiction most definitely does include, according to the Collective, is 'a personal, identifiable voice. The writer is usually quite present in the text' (CNFC nd).

Memoirist and essayist Barrie Jean Borich enlarges this perspective in her definition of the creative nonfiction form: 'It is writing about and from a world that includes the author's life and/or the author's eye on the lives of others' (Borich 2013). Borich perceives the author as an integral part of her work: 'the "I", the literary version of the author, is either explicitly or implicitly present' (2013). The authorial presence, then, is a consistent element of these writers' ideas about the creative nonfiction form. These ideas create both challenges and guidelines for the memoirist or essayist attempting to develop a resonant narrative.

Personal essay, memoir and memory

The essay and memoir are the manifestations of creative nonfiction writing that we will now explore in more detail. Mark Tredinnick suggests that personal essays have six qualities: they are personal and voiced, they wander and wonder, and they demonstrate humility. They are also true. They are, he writes, 'a kind of story about real things, real thoughts, real people, the palpable and actual world; you can make up the essay, but you don't make up its subject matter' (Tredinnick 2011: 63). The other qualities in his definition are questions of style, tone and voice, and we will return to these shortly.

Because memoir deals in memory, it is often considered something of a grey area when it comes to classification. Memory, as we all know, is subject to the vagaries of time. The ways in which we recollect events changes as we grow older and with repeated telling. Some memories fade, others grow in significance, some disappear altogether. Often, the way in which we talk about, or think about, certain memories changes as we begin to develop a deeper understanding of ourselves. The writer also makes choices, consciously or subconsciously, about which memories to include in life narratives, and how they are portrayed.

Recently, in this journal, Michael Sala reminded us of the literary and historical links between 'confessional' literature and memoir that originate in the writings of Augustine and Rousseau. Confessional writing, he argues, demonstrates vulnerability, and is thus a useful tool for engendering trust and engagement with the reader, who perceives the 'vulnerable' writer as being 'earnest to the point of compromising himself' (Sala 2013). While we find the term 'confessional' problematic when discussing the modern memoir form, and suggest alternatives such as an 'openness' or 'frankness' when revealing expressions of human frailty, it may be useful to think, as Sala does, of the effect of frank and revelatory first-person writing as 'decentering the authority'

of the memoirist, engendering vulnerability in the writer and her narrator/protagonist, and thus creating a connection with the reader (Sala 2013).

A connection is also made through the creative crafting of narrative that enables readers to enter imaginatively into the text rather than to absorb a series of facts. 'My life,' writes Robert Dessaix, 'is there (as Balzac's, say, or Chatwin's, probably isn't) to give readers the words to reconfigure their own' (Dessaix 2012: 37). He is writing about a number of his books, which he suggests are memoirs, but of the ordinary, rather than the celebrated, life. He finds that his readers take on the events of his life in relation to their own. They enjoy the 'dovetailing of our lives, as well as ... the differences between them'. They gain 'fresh perspectives on' and pleasure in 'the restyling of the self that a good book offers, rather than information' (Dessaix 2012: 37).

The memoir, perhaps the most intimate of all forms, attempts to explore and convey a writer's own life and experiences. In memoir a writer not only relates stories from the past, he or she attempts to construct some kind of meaning from them. Thus the memoir is more than a series of events narrated. It is an investigation of self, or, as Susie Eisenhuth and Willa McDonald describe it, an 'interrogation of consciousness' (Eisenhuth & McDonald 2007: 148). Interrogation is a critical examination that provides insight; that provides answers: the why of events and personal actions. Memoir, as an interrogation of memory, is the interpretation of events through the lens of experience that enables understanding of an individual consciousness within a context of the wider world.

Like the personal essay – perhaps even more so – the memoir is bound by the rule of 'honesty' with the reader. How far this honesty extends is quite difficult to prescribe. A writer must be truthful about the circumstances of the past (one cannot, for example, make up a brother who did a stint in prison or an abusive childhood) but most writers and readers would agree that it is acceptable for dialogue to be approximate and accounts of events to differ slightly from those of others who might also have experienced them.

The dilemma for the memoir or essay writer is in maintaining control of fact, of fallible memory, and of the illusive and subjective interpretation of truth while creating art. Such concerns are, of course, not limited to writers of nonfiction narrative. Fiction writers, too, seek to reveal 'truths' via narrative. Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola argue that '[m]emory itself can be called its own bit of creative nonfiction. We continually – often unconsciously – renovate our memories, shaping them into stories that bring coherence to chaos. Memory has been called the ultimate "mythmaker", continually seeking meaning in the random and often unfathomable events in our lives' (Miller & Paola 2012: 4).

Lisa Knopp suggests ways to indicate speculative narrative when the factual details of a memoir or personal story are not clear or available to the writer, as might be the case when the writer is not an eye-witness to particular events, or her memories are of early childhood experiences. Knopp's narrative technique allows the writer to recreate a scene, but as a range of images, or series of exploratory speculations, which may have happened but cannot be confirmed because memory is both complex and inaccurate. Despite her inability to accurately reproduce factual information, admitting to the use of speculation helps to establish the writer's credibility (Knopp 2009).

Vivian Gornick writes of the 'truth-speaking personae' of memoir writing, which conjure 'an insight that organized the writing', and the construction of a

character (a limited self) ‘to serve [that] insight’ (Gornick 2001: 23). It is to these ‘truth-speaking personae’ that she responds as writer and reader:

...I mean that organic wholeness of being in a narrator that the reader experiences as reliable; the one we can trust will take us on a journey, make the piece arrive, bring us out into a clearing where the sense of things is larger than it was before. (Gornick 2001: 24)

The persona is the part of the writer that is peculiarly equipped to tell a particular story. Michael Steinberg amplifies the idea of a persona that is selected or shaped as a trustworthy narrator, separate to the writer, as a ‘persona, a three-dimensional self; a fully imagined character who is part me and part not me’ (Steinberg 2013). He is clear that this is a choice, one which needs to suit the narrative he is constructing.

The potential guidelines are starting to emerge. The writer decentres some authority, giving agency to the reader and engaging her imagination. There are speculative elements for crafting memory, which is by its nature fallible, but the writer must exert some authority over the speculation and fact. We argue that the writer exerts control through the persona of a narrator, Steinberg’s three-dimensional character who, as Gornick suggests, is a limited self. This persona is a narrator-guide, separate from the writer, who takes the reader through the fallible memories and particular narratives designed by the writer. The writer designs the narrative journey, the guide or ‘I’ persona is immersed in it.

Debating the reliability of the narrative persona

TriQuarterly online journal recently published a series of propositions about the construction, and (un)reliability, of the narrative persona of first-person nonfiction writing. Practitioners of memoir and the personal essay were invited to contribute to this discussion. In this series of ‘craft essays’, a challenge was mounted against the conventional wisdom that suggests the narrator of memoir and the personal essay must be ‘reliable’. Is it possible to write first-person narrative nonfiction using an unreliable narrator as a deliberate writing strategy? Is the narrator indeed a constructed persona, or does she convey the ‘real’ and unique voice of the writer?

A range of responses ensued: the narrator, for example, is the writer (Benjamin 2013), but not all of her (Schwartz 2012, Schwartz 2013, Steinberg 2013); the narrator is a persona, a character constructed by the writer in order to carry a particular story (Kadetsky 2013, Schwartz 2012, Steinberg 2012, Steinberg 2013); the writer has multiple personas that inhabit her prose at different times and for different purposes (Schwartz 2012, Schwartz 2013, Steinberg 2012, Steinberg 2013); the construction of a narrative persona is an unconscious act by the writerly self (Lopate 2012, Schwartz 2012); the narrative persona or ‘personality’ is not very different from the writer’s real ‘voice’ (Lopate 2012), nor does the writer have multiple personae (Lopate 2012); an acknowledgement of ‘unreliability’ makes the narrator ‘reliable’ (Benjamin 2013, Schwartz 2013) and the narrating ‘I’ must be credible, providing insight to gain the reader’s trust (Schwartz 2013).

We acknowledge that these responses are of the spontaneous kind; the published exchanges were adapted from panel discussions at the 2012 and 2013 Association of Writers & Writing Programs conferences in the US. Nevertheless, taken as a whole they demonstrate some of the confusions felt by

emerging and even by more experienced writers about the relationship between the writer and narrator of personal creative nonfiction.

Despite having earlier written about building a character to contain the narrative 'I' (Lopate 2001: 38), in this later essay Phillip Lopate states that he has no recollection of constructing a 'made-up self' to narrate his own essays and memoir. 'On the contrary,' he writes, 'what impresses and appalls me is how little I seem to be able to change my everyday personality, not to mention my writing style' (Lopate 2012). Lopate seeks a single voice that surprises him: writing is thus a process during which he listens for 'a voice in my head' (2012).

Mimi Schwartz also seeks during writing to be surprised by the emergence of a persona from multiple manifestations of her self: 'If there is only one self, unchallenged as narrator,' she writes, 'I'm more predictable; surprises are harder to come by. But when I imagine many Mimis responding to experience, tension gets into the writing' (Schwartz 2012). Schwartz acknowledges the Jungian perception of the persona as an act of disguise, a 'public mask' constructed to hide the 'real self'. Her own belief is that when writing memoir, rather than concealment, a particular persona represents 'a missing part of myself that I gratefully welcomed back' (Schwartz 2012).

Michael Steinberg (2013) alludes to the impossibility of a reliable narrator in memoir due to the fallibility of memory. Similarly, Elizabeth Kadetsky (2013) argues that the narrator of autobiography is inherently unreliable, particularly so when writing 'set-in-the-present' scenes. This narrator, she suggests, lacks candor because, as the writer, she knows her future. As David Shields has written elsewhere:

[T]he 'I' is the most deceptive tricky pronoun. There are two of us. I'm a chronicler of this character at the center who is, but in the necessary sense not, me. He doesn't know what's around the next bend. He's ignorant of consequences. He moves through the book in a state of innocence about the future, whereas of course I as the writer, from the time I begin writing the first paragraph, do know what the future holds. (Shields 2008: 84)

Is this foreknowledge on the part of the writer, however, a genuine marker of 'disingenuousness' on the part of the narrator, as Kadetsky seems to imply? Perhaps it is merely an artifice of composition? Reading the unreliable narrator, Kadetsky suggests, creates an effect that suggests 'reader and publisher are having a joke on author/narrator' (2013). Clay Benjamin concurs. Unreliable narration entwines writer and reader in partnership against an oblivious narrator (Benjamin 2013).

Later, Kadetsky softens her terminology from 'unreliability' to 'fallibility'. The writers privy to the *TriQuarterly* conversation, she writes, all agree that a gap exists between writer and narrator. In this gap, she speculates, 'resides unreliability – or, in any case, fallibility' (Kadetsky 2013). For Schwartz the ability of a narrator to reflect on the situation they are telling is imperative: 'unreliability', that which leads to a lack of reader trust, is found in narrators who speak with 'over-the-top-certainty' (2013).

The persona, Gornick suggests, is that part of the writer that is peculiarly equipped to tell a particular story, filtering the 'raw material of a writer's own undisguised being' (Gornick 2001: 6). The key term here is 'undisguised'. If this created yet limited self is merely a 'disguise' rather than a version of the

writer, the reader ceases to read the narrator as ‘truth speaking’ (Gornick 2001: 24).

An exploration of the ‘gap’ identified by Kadetsky holds the key to understanding the outcomes of the above debate, which is not purely about an unreliable or fallible narrator, but the positioning of both writer and first-person creative nonfiction narrator on a spectrum moving from writer through a range of narrative personas to a fictional (and thus potentially untrustworthy) narrative character. The more closely the narrative persona reflects the writer’s values, the smaller is the gap between writer and narrator, the more easily first-person creative nonfiction can be read as ‘true’.

Defining the gap

At one level, the variety and disparity of opinion amongst the *TriQuarterly* writers is hardly surprising. Their exchange mirrors the complexity of the relationship between the writer and the narrator in meeting the expectations of both the writer and the reader of personal nonfiction for narrative veracity. In his essay ‘The state of nonfiction today’, Phillip Lopate contends (from Steiner 2005: 14-16) that ‘there is an inherent collision between rational demands for thought to have one truthful, verifiable meaning and the tendency of language to suggest ambiguous, evasive, multiple meanings’ (Lopate 2013: 7).

There is a difficulty apparent here, too, with the definitions of the terminology we use to discuss writing, suggesting slippery language is as much a problem as the actual construction of the narrative persona. The terms we are juggling with are ‘unreliability’, ‘fallibility’ and ‘deficiency’. They need to be separated from deception, which suggests deliberate invention rather than deficient recall of ‘fact’.

Despite confusion around the writer’s creation of the narrator, the *TriQuarterly* writers’ positions are reconcilable. All agree that a gap exists between writer and narrator. Some choose to define evidence of this gap as ‘unreliability’ in the narrator. Others use terminology such as ‘fallible’ or ‘deficient’ to describe the narration. Despite the provocative questions raised at the beginning of the *TriQuarterly* seminar, no one actually suggests that the writer is consciously trying to deceive the reader into thinking the writer is someone she is not, nor that the facts depicted in her narrative did not happen.

In an analysis of *The Year Of Magical Thinking*, James Phelan explores a type of ‘unreliability’ in the narration of Joan Didion’s memoir, which he terms ‘deficient narration’. Didion’s apparent confusion about the cause of her husband’s death, rather than being read as a deception of the reader, writes Phelan, ‘functions as very powerful evidence of the depth of Didion’s grief and of her need to move beyond it. ... Didion’s usual sure-footed self-presentation falters here’ (Phelan 2011: 134-5). Yet, this narrative hesitancy or confusion over the facts, acts to amplify the observable traumatic effects on Didion of her husband’s sudden death: her narrative persona displays vulnerability. Readers thus make subconscious or implicit judgments about whether the narrator of the work of creative nonfiction is being disingenuous, or more accurately, as Phelan suggests, merely, ‘deficient’ in their narration.

Here our interest is in what might be termed inadvertent ‘unreliability’ or ‘deficiency’ in narration rather than in those writers who set out deliberately to deceive their readers for commercial, social, political or other reasons: the Norma Kouri’s and Helen Darville’s of this world, who assume deceptive authorial and narrative personas. The narrative personas of first person

nonfiction at times, as Mimi Schwartz suggests, ‘just misread their world with varying degrees of fallibility’ (2013). Fallibility, the narrative persona’s capability for error, reflects a personal unreliability or deficiency of interpretation, not an intention to deceive.

The narrative persona may fail in other ways. A form of confessional writing that solicits self-forgiveness rather than wider insight leads to a ‘misery’ memoir, and a failure to connect with the reader. The narrator declaims a litany of recalled childhood suffering, perhaps, instead of conveying the writer’s intention to invite ‘the reader on a mutual journey of exploration into this subject matter with the writer’s personal experiences and perspective as the lens’ (Sala 2013). Confessional memoirs of this kind, we suggest, demonstrate an insufficient space, or gap, between the writer and the constructed narrator. The personal narrative thus becomes a series of uncrafted and indiscriminate utterances read as self-indulgence.

Conversely, if the gap between the writer and her narrative persona is too wide, and the reader perceives a surrogated or ‘disguised being’, the narrative is read with suspicion. The reader, it seems, does not trust the voice. Writing personal narrative thus becomes a gap-balancing-act for the nonfiction writer.

Crafting the voice of writer-as-narrator

There is a suggestive elision between the idea of the narrative persona and of voice in the *TriQuarterly* conversations. When we consider a naïve or persuasive narrator, or one who is compassionate or ‘too full of herself’ are we indeed discussing only persona? Naïvety and persuasion are qualities of ‘voice’, that complex characteristic that makes a persona identifiable. Perhaps also they influence ‘tone’, which establishes the writer’s position or values in relation to her subject.

Presenting a first person narrative requires the development of the writer-as-narrator as a trusted voice. Yet Gornick confesses to self-pity, a whining and accusatory tone in her ‘habitually lived with’ voice that she finds ‘odious’ (Gornick 2001: 21-3); so too, Lopate notes that most people feel somewhat repelled by their everyday persona. ‘One of the main stumbling blocks placed before the writing of personal essays,’ he writes, is ‘self-hatred’ (Lopate 2001: 42). The whining, self-pitying writer’s voice, like the voice of the misery memoirist, will alienate. Carl Klaus introduces the idea of the ‘impersonated voice’ of the personal essayist as a fabrication or construction, ‘much tidier than the mess of memories, thoughts, and feelings arising in one’s consciousness’ (Klaus 2010: 1). The constructed character and voice of the writer-as-narrator can be both trusted and engaging when limited for the purpose of conveying a particular first-person narrative.

It is interesting to consider exactly what it is that the reader is responding to when they perceive a narrator as trustworthy. It may be a particular persona, the voice that conveys ‘reliability’, or it may be the style to which the reader responds. Are these qualities of writing, indeed, separable? ‘Voice,’ writes Philip Gerard, takes in style – the cumulative effect of the way sentences are crafted into paragraphs – but it is somehow more than style. Voice is what the reader hears in his mind’s ear, the strong sense that the words of the story are coming from another living, human personality with a unique perspective on events. [In effect, from] somebody you can trust (Gerard 1996: 134).

Voice conveys tone. Thus a change of tone – from earnest to humorous – changes the voice. Does this also change the reader’s perception of who the

narrator is? Editor Jack Hart defines ‘voice’ as ‘[t]he overall personality of the writer as perceived through the text’ (Hart 2007: 238). Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz describe it as constructed of ‘a mix of words, rhythms and attitude’. For them, voice communicates the intimacy of friendship, a personality that may or may not be believed (Perl & Schwartz 2014: 56). ‘Voice is at the heart of creative nonfiction, whether “I” is used or not. If the voice is “off”, the writer must adjust it’ (2014: 74).

Mark Kramer and Wendy Call write of the interconnection between voice and structure: ‘If you establish yourself as a trustworthy and genial host, you can take your reader – and your story – anywhere’ (Kramer & Call 2007: 126). All texts have a voice, Kramer and Call assert, which acts as a guide to ‘find the most engaging route towards the thematic destination’ (2007: 126). Becoming comfortable in the narrative voice of the ‘trustworthy and genial host’ is one of the most important elements of crafting the journey of personal nonfiction.

Voice, the right voice for a particular narrative, can emerge gradually as the writing progresses; it is not a conscious choice, though it is recognisable when the writer finds it (Perl & Schwartz 2014: 67). Schwartz looks for something ‘surprising’ that allows her to know that this voice is equipped to drive her narrative. When this happens, Schwartz writes, ‘As soon as I put the words down, I knew they were true’ (2012). Recognition of their particularised narrative voice is a decisive moment for the writer.

Perl and Schwartz state that the ‘I’ must be in context to the story being told: ‘If readers think it’s too loud and self-centred, they get edgy’ (2014: 62). ‘Self-analysis is crucial to developing a strong voice,’ writes Susan Orlean. ‘Who am I? Why do I write? Your identity and your self-understanding become subliminal parts of your writer’s voice – especially in long-form narrative writing’ (Orlean 2007: 158). Orlean suggests writing as if telling a story to friends over dinner. ‘At such moments you aren’t self-conscious, and you aren’t thinking about your editor’ (2007: 158).

The ‘I’ also needs to instinctively emerge from the writer’s crafting of the writer-as-narrator. As Gerard suggests, ‘If you try to have a voice you’ll fail... Voice is instinctive. It is the hallmark of who you are’ (Gerard 1996: 134). Thus the integrity of this voice, which neither whines nor grates, nor seeks self forgiveness, is that it aligns ‘instinctively’ with the values of both the crafted writer-as-narrator and the writer.

For essayist Mark Tredinnick, voice is integral to the form of the personal essay. He delights in the sense of voice that establishes a personal perspective on truth: ‘This is my voice... This is what I make of things, and this is what they make of me’ (Tredinnick 2011: 62). The tone of the essay, he writes, is one of humility or modesty. Borrowing from American poet and memoirist Kim Stafford (Stafford 2010: 302), Tredinnick describes the essay as a ‘musical arrangement of passionate facts’, advocating not simply a first-person creative narrative, but one with a particular voice and a powerful style (Tredinnick 2011: 62). He sees the essay as a literary conversation in which someone in close proximity is ‘halfway toward singing to you, about something they’ve learned by heart’ (2011: 63). The essay ‘must be written and regarded as art, not just discourse’ (2011: 61). The tone is crafted from the writer’s passion for her subject. That passionate tone aligns with the values of the writer, and filters through into the voice of the writer-as-narrator.

Conclusion: bridging the gap

The first-person creative nonfiction narrator is other than the writer, though their perspectives are closely aligned. This first person narrator must simultaneously be perceived by the reader as truth-telling, as reliable, as capable of creating insight: they must engender the reader's trust. Such a narrator is created for the singular purpose of delivering the narrative. This narrator is only superficially engaged with other aspects of the writer's life and is, as described by Vivian Gornick, 'only her solid, limited self' (2001: 23). Such personae, or 'impersonated voices' or 'limited selves', may assume the habitual or 'natural' voice of the writer or a more crafted voice suited to a particular situation, but it always conveys her values. The 'right' voice is thus a matter of experimentation, perseverance and experience. It may be discordant but not disingenuous or deceptive. This is the writer-as-narrator.

Within memoir and personal essay, particularly, the writer faces the paradox of creating a narrative that will be read as 'true' in the context of the fallibility of memory for facts, experiences and points of view. The space between writer and writer-as-narrator is vital to the integrity of memoir and personal essay. The gap, which enables creative composition to occur, is the distance between writer and narrator at the moment of discovery. The writer is the repository of the full gamut of the experience: she knows what happens before it is written. She selects and orders those fragments of the experience that will make up the story she designs. The story is voiced by the limited presence of a purpose-built narrator whose job it is to convey the reader on a 'mutual journey of exploration into this subject matter with the writer's personal experiences and perspective as the lens' (Sala 2013). Because the narrator is in the moment, while the writer controls the moment, the narrator's perspective is aligned with but more limited than that of the writer.

If the gap in perspective between writer and writer-as-narrator is too small, the writing lacks a capacity for insight. If the gap is too large and the writer-as-narrator moves into the realm of fictionalised memories and meanings, then the writer loses control of both the reliability of the voice and the aesthetic crafting or composition. This breaks the implicit contract with the reader, who has an expectation of both artistic craft and 'truth' in these personal nonfiction forms. Gerard writes of the responsibility of the writer in crafting that truth as:

Giving the reader a clear signal about exactly what kind of truth you're claiming – literal truth of event, emotional truth, truth by hypothetical illustration, approximate truth of memory, or merely the truth of intuition guided by special insight.
(Gerard 1996: 123)

Such clear signals of the writer's values conveyed in voice and tone succeed when the message is filtered through a persona, the writer-as-narrator, who is equipped to provide insight into the specific truths being explored.

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