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The Naïve Narrator in Student-Authored Environmental Writing

Introduction

William Riggan argues that the use of the naïve narrator in literature helps the reader generate toward them "considerable" goodwill and sympathy (181). We sympathize because we are not, or hope not to be, as naïve as the narrator and can relate to similar moments when we were the naïf. But mostly, we sympathize because do not feel manipulated by the narrator. The very stance of the curious, down-to-earth narrator in environmental literature allows for the development of what Lawrence Buell terms "a mature environmental aesthetic" ("The Environmental Imagination" 32). The narrator is not trying to be something other than a good teller, a good renderer—so that the reader can feel and enjoy detail enter them in their own imaginative way, on their own terms, without feeling pushed. The reader is left to make up his or her mind on the environmental topic at hand.

There is no voice of "the environmentalist" with a naïve narrator. Righteousness, even expertise (or worse, feigned expertise), can invade the psychic space necessary for a reader to move into, space that should be free of judgment, space that allows readers to participate by making their own meaning, by making their own minds up based on the detail presented, the ordering of which it is presented, and the narrator's voice. It is the narrator who, in Aristotelian terms, evokes ethos. The credibility of the writer is established by appearing to have the good of the audience at heart. Doing so implies more than a feeling that the narrator would not deceive the reader, and perhaps more to do with the humility of staying primarily in a straightforward presentational mode: "Too much telling is a risky approach," reminds Dinty

W. Moore, editor of *Brevity* (qtd. in Patton). Yet the narrator must also remain unafraid of displaying folly, confusion, taking time in the story to piece things together, and even leaving the story without everything figured out. This too is voice. Chris Mays' point here is relevant. On the one hand, "When at its most effective, writing can seem completely straightforward, and the truths it renders can seem obvious" (320); on the other, "the primary source of writing's power is not its simplicity, but its ability to disguise its own incredible complexity."

A naïve narrator need not be overly introspective. The naiveté inherent in the simple presentational mode invites the reader in as co-learner on a journey. Overly introspective narration can come off as self-absorbed rambling or pontification, destroying directness and leading to mistrust and boredom. Working with student writers, I often see them mastering quite naturally what Michael Pollan warns that seasoned writers often lose:

> Journalists often write as people who have mastered subjects and are telling you about them. That's a real turn-off for readers. In my work I often begin as a naïf. It's a good place to start because it's a lot closer to where your reader is. Instead of starting as someone who knows the answers, you begin as someone learning about something. That's a good way to connect with readers.

Again, because there is no environmentalist per se present, there is no agenda. For these reasons, the stance of the naïve narrator is particularly appealing to readers, especially to new writers at the same experience level reading their peers' published work. The voice of the naïve narrator establishes the journey with the reader and the writer being on the same page at the start, leaving space to learn together as the journey progresses.

The Course

I teach a course titled "Writing about Environment and Ecology" at the University of Toronto as part of the Professional Writing and Communication (PWC) program of the Institute of Communication, Culture

and Information Technology (ICCIT). The purpose of the course is for students to learn to produce high quality journalistic prose on an environmental topic using current scientific and academic literature. Most are writing in this genre for the first time. All will have completed the prerequisite, "Expressive Writing," PWC's foundation creative nonfiction course, but for many, my course represents students' first crack at research-based writing. The course attracts students in both science and non-science disciplines. The standard for the quality of the writing in the courses is high, higher than the standard applied in many university courses.

Early in the course, I assign a piece of environmentally-focused creative nonfiction. The assignment is to write a short, expressive, first-person piece based on the writer's life experience and observations. The assignment builds upon narrative writing skills students have honed in "Expressive Writing" and serves as a way-in to thinking about the broad topics of environment and ecology in a personal way. The purpose, I tell students, is for them to explore who they are in terms of their relationship with the natural (i.e., more-than-human) world. Students may, for instance, write about time spent outdoors, including formal or informal learning about the natural world or environmental issues, or about encountering environmentally minded people. *Feel free*, I say, *to write about disliking nature or feeling forced to be "environmentally-minded," or about a time when nature somehow shocked or disturbed you, or even about a time when your actions towards the natural world weren't ideal. Choose a moment,* I say, *when nature appeared as an actor or character, because too often in literature nature appears as little more than the stage upon which the human drama is acted out. Aim to break this cliché.*

Another feature of the course is that it employs a peer model course text made up of exemplary work produced by previous students. At this point students will have read pieces such as Kimberly Knight's "East Coast," a reflection on the writer visiting Newfoundland and seeing the places like the Trout Hole, the place she spent summer afternoons swimming, and the place where the Shoal Harbour River "pours through the stream bed. It churns and foams through eddies and dips" (69), the place where,

while noticing changes in the landscape since her last visit, Knight hears her name called out from a distance by her childhood friend. Students will have also read Yun Ma's "Mom's Backyard Garden," the story of a daughter observing over time, her mother's pleasure in de-stressing through tending her backyard vegetable garden (61).

Ecocriticism of Student-Authored Works

Having long been interested in the question of what texts we consider worthy of study, I wanted to select one of the best student-authored texts and apply established criteria used in evaluating environmental literature. If I consider student-authored work good enough to serve as writing models, it follows that this same work should be rich enough for serious study. Since the assignment was creative nonfiction assignment, and because its purpose was to build upon students' previous writing experience (all had completed "Expressive Writing" as a prerequisite) while using that experience to introduce them to the topic of environmental writing, and because students were familiar with the grading criteria for Expressive Writing, I used that as grading criteria, and instructed students as follows:

- Whatever you do, keep your piece character- *and* incident-based. Write a story where you showcase nature and human nature. We need to meet, see and care about people. And something needs to happen—an incident. In short, a good story will be about more than one thing.
- Show, don't tell. This means you must leave the reader space to inhabit your writing.
- Make up the truth (so to speak). Do not invent scenes or characters. Base your story on a real-life event you observed or experienced. But when you have trouble writing dialogue from the past, approximate it. This is acceptable in creative nonfiction, so long as we give our writing this label.

- Don't write cheese. Don't write a touchy-feely piece. The chances of writing cheesy, formulaic garbage with this assignment are high. I may ask you to rewrite.
- Keep it place-based. Tell the story of a place through details: little pictures. In fact, if you have related photos, I recommend you go through them to twig your memory.
- T.S. Eliot advised writers to never speak of feelings but to produce in their writing the objective correlative: physical objects and/or gestures which suggest emotion.
- Consider using vignettes. With this structure you write a story as a string of pearls, postcard snapshots, each leaving the reader a small impression. Those little impressions will add up to what your piece is about as a whole.
- Somehow the natural world should present itself almost as a character, even if you leave it in the background for most of the piece. Don't write an outdoor sports story that has nothing to do with the natural world. Write about nature commanding your attention—through a teacher or other living being, a place or an unanticipated event. Nature in this sense need not be confined to harsh weather, but may be a water strider skirting across the water. The moment may—and probably should be—subtle. But the characters should be strong—and believable.

My purpose also originated via Guy Allen's description that the place students often find themselves when they have to produce writing in the academy as the "meaning void" (281) and as a writing teacher, I bristled at students' work having no meaning beyond the assignment itself. For Allen, the opportunity provided for students by the personal essay is the opportunity to put themselves in the prose fully, and to enjoy this process of discovery. When this happens, writes Allen, "the writer becomes an acting subject rather than an acted-upon object" (284).

Similarly, the aim of much environmental writing is to bring awareness of the overrepresentation of the natural world as object by humankind, and to consider culture's role in bringing a new awareness of

the human and the more-than-human's intersubjectivity. To take one example, we can look at David Abram's often-quoted work:

> The breathing, sensing body draws its sustenance and its very substance from the soils, plants, and elements that surround it; it continually contributes itself, in turn, to the air, to the composting earth, to the nourishment of insects and oak trees and squirrels, ceaselessly spreading out of itself as well as breathing the world into itself, so that it is very difficult to discern, at any moment, precisely where this living body begins and where it ends. (46)

Thomas Hothem, in "Suburban Studies and College Writing: Applying Ecocomposition," argues for "treating students' personal experience as an object of knowledge" as crucial for their acquiring a sense of context "with which to gauge their relationship to their surroundings, their backgrounds, their education, and hence their future" (38). Buell considers a gaining sense of place "a kind of palimpsest of serial place-experiences" ("Future" 73). In *Composition and Sustainability: Teaching for a Threatened Generation*, Derek Owens takes this further, suggesting that when students "begin to view their personal and academic needs and desires through the lens of sustainability," it is possible to envision composition studies as a form of environmental studies (6).

One would think that ecocriticism would have taken on more study of student writing, but I have found little ecocritical pedagogy of this sort. I am not sure if this relates to an outdated view of student writing as not real writing, as opposed to the view of student writing has having its own merit as substantive, impressive works in progress. In *Teaching with Student Texts*, Harris, Miles, and Paine echo the notion of the classroom as a place of knowledge production alongside the archive or the lab, adding that most writing teachers take this view (4). Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes, in "Literature, Composition, and the Structure of English," question the view that the writing of students is all practice, while that of professionals is all earnest (101). Lad Tobin writes about learning to read not for error and assessment "but for nuance, possibility, gaps, potential," ("Process Pedagogy" 6) and coming to see

student essays as "texts to be interpreted, discussed, marveled at" (6), and that the process of reading student texts can be "delightful and instructive" ("Reading" 29). Leonard A. Podis and Joanne M. Podis argue in "The Value of Student Writing as Reading" that acknowledging the value of student writing aligns with such recent developments as the undergraduate research movement and similar "high impact" pedagogical practices (51). If I value student writing pedagogically, it follows that I should look at it more closely and see what it has to teach me.

Praxis: The Naïve Narrator

The narrator is always a construct that exists and breathes in the text. "The reader must find you amusing," Phillip Lopate writes, "amusing enough to follow you" (22). Manfred Jahn, in his 2017 *Narratology*: *A Guide to the Theory of Narrative*, argues that "A reader can hear a textual voice with his or her 'mind's ear', just as s/he will be able to see the story's action with his or her mind's eye." Unconsciously, we build a picture of the type of person the teller is, complete with our judgements in terms of their believability and their perspective on the world. We decide as we read if the teller is someone we would like to have a drink and further conversation with; if they are someone braver than us, if they have the strength of character to be admired; and if they are worthy of our pity. Paul Eakin reminds us that storytelling is a performance, as is the act of reading (4).

Wayne Booth notes that at the first mention of an "I" we are having a mediated experience (152). Carl Klaus points out the contrivance of the narrator as being at once related to the author's sense of self, but being simultaneously "a complex illusion of self" (47). We can get a glimpse of the self of the writer from their writing, but never a complete one, and always one that has been negotiated in the mind of the writer in terms of decisions made on what to show, what to hide, and how to do so in service to the piece at hand. Lad Tobin distinguishes the I-characters as follows: first is "the 'I' who is essentially the character in the action of the narrative," second is "the 'I' who is the essayist reflecting on that action," and the

"third 'I'" is the person who has created both of the other two ("Third"). To extend this, Michael Steinberg reminds us that as readers of a good story, we project bits of ourselves onto the persona of the narrator so as to imbue "a fully imagined character who is part me and part not me." For writer and reader, the telling is as much the story as the story is the story. And it is with these points in mind that I'd like to look more closely at the narrative persona my former student, Claudio Carosi, creates in his writing.

Carosi chose to write an expressive piece about something simple, an everyday morning walk with his dog in the natural area near his home. The first-person narrator in "Oreo" is the story's main character, and the only human character. This "I-as-protagonist," as Manfred Jahn calls it, experiences a narrative arc that unfolds towards a climax (his fall down a steep embankment) that leaves the character, we assume, in a changed state. We see the narrator as main character early on:

> Oreo poked his head out of his doghouse when he smelled me coming and hurried to the door of his cage. I heard him breathe and slobber as he hopped on his hind legs and pawed up the fencing, making it rattle. Goodmorninggoodmorninggoodmorninggoodmorning. "Yes, yes I'm here," I said.

The vivid characterization of Oreo juxtaposed with the utterance by the narrator that he is present to him, signals the reader that he or she is likely to be reading a story about the relationship between a dog and its owner. The chosen title of the story also spotlights this. Pushing the writing in a new direction in that last line shows the writer's deftness for capturing Oreo's excitement: the writer is not afraid to break the rules and ply the language in order to try to create a syllabic image, one with forward movement and vigor. The image not only stays true to the dog's instinctual behaviour, but also right away introduces the dog as a main character unto its own, a character as unmistakably other-than-human. The narrator speaking aloud right after, as if with no other choice but to respond, also rings true to the impact of the lively presence of his beloved dog before him. Even though Oreo has left him a mess to clean up, the narrator comments on his fur "looking more silver in the morning light," appearing "very showy." It's easy to see the bond between canine and human owner, a love despite tensions, marked first here, and later seen in the pinnacle

moment in the piece's finale. The narrator here is not pushing anything untoward our way. We are apparently seeing the actions unadorned. Part of the qualities of the narrator we relate to has to do with a projection of how we see ourselves: we want to spend time with someone who does not push their views upon us. This is what I try to teach my students. The narrator here in Carosi's piece is just telling it like it is. We do not detect an agenda.

The story continues: "Whenever he walked on too far, I'd jerk the leash back. He'd stop until I caught up or got close enough and then do it again. Always at the end of his leash, Oreo walks me." The narrator exhibits an attractive vulnerability. Not being in control here is a moment of enjoyment and freedom. Even as the narrator has matured and gained strength, the walking of the family dog is a lesson in letting go, since Oreo's power and instinct cannot be matched. Yet a pleasure exists here. I sense a pleasant resignation in the tone of the writing—one that I can almost hear the narrator saying, when we go out, I'm here learning to be led. In a sense, the narrator's humanness in this moment is expanded upon by relinquishing control to the animal because the animal is in touch with the natural world in a way the human cannot be. We learn shortly after that the dog has taken the narrator out of his automatic thoughts, away from the stresses on his mind. A self that is not his anxious self is present with the dog:

> That's what I thought about that morning. Not the fight I had with mom last night, or that dad confiscated my mickey of Wiser's and there was no more Alyssa and I. I didn't consider any of that, that morning. I just watched Oreo take me behind the shed in the corner of the lot like he always does. The ground quickly grew from grass to mud as we turned the corner and reached the hole in the fence. Oreo likes the mud, loves the mud. He could walk along the drier sides of the path but he stays right in the middle because he likes to paint himself black. "Get out of there!" I pulled his leash. I always stay on the sides.

When the narrator falls, we see that his voice is still surprised by the ways of the world and it is this element of evaluating student work in terms of effective environmental purpose that seems to be the key

element of success. Despite knowing the dog well, knowing what dog-walking entails, the unexpected filters its way in to the narrator's life.

> "God fucking damnit." My legs felt chewed all over and damp. I felt my face caked with black peat and mulch in my fists. "God fucking damnit." I looked up at the clay mound. Oreo pawed along the river bank, always looking nervously across the river. He saw something.

But when the narrator looks at Oreo, even though he is aware of how his dog acts, when Oreo sees something he does not see, there is a speck of naiveté in the account. He both knows Oreo and doesn't know Oreo. It is as if he's been to a moment like this before and knows that anything can happen. The narrator is not trying to showcase his knowledge of the dog to the reader, but rather let us in on his consciousness at play. You get the sense that he wrote the story from the heart, without pretense or artifice. As Lopate writes in his essay, "On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character," "this process of turning oneself into a character is not self-absorbed navel gazing, but rather a potential release from narcissism" (25). Nobody is trying to impress anybody here, and this naiveite if you will, suits this piece of environmental creative nonfiction. Reflecting upon his experience in my course, Carosi says: "I voiced myself both on and off the page. There was no 'way' to write, only a living truth I could grasp by the activity itself." My impression of this insight is that Carosi's writing sprung from his being ready to use writing to further something that needed furthering inside him at that moment in his life.

As the piece closes, the human is in command. We see this with "I straggled towards him. My knee hurt and I felt dizzy. He started up down the bank again and I bellowed "Oreo!" once more with a wild whip at his collar. He sat." At this point, I can almost hear the dog whimpering. The truth is, the narrator can spout all he wants: the fact that he could have hit a rock and bled to death doesn't change a thing. The dog is a dog; the human, a human. The dog belongs to the scents on the path; the mud belongs on his paws, for outside is where the dog walks, discovers, sleeps, eats, and shits. The human keeps nature on a human-constructed leash, especially when that control is threatened. Gone is the softly spoken apology,

"Sorry to disturb you." The wild whip sets up the final two-word, subject-verb stab on the page: "He sat." We hear the dominance in the rhythm of the flow of the words, and in the powerful small picture evoked. It's almost as if naiveite now is a scary stance to admit to being in. Concludes Carosi, "As my arm reached out to Oreo's head, I stopped. Panting with his tongue out in a doggy smile, Oreo looked up at me, then out into the trees again."

This focal point suggests some awareness gained by the narrator of the depth of the difference between human and animal. The narrator is ever so slightly less naïve than he was at the start. The ending seems to hint to a return on the narrator's part to a necessary resignation, for presumably all the rest of his daily life will be steeped in human doings and human concerns, while only a few things like these walks will remain as living reminders to the power, danger, and depth of the natural world outside his door. This ending lets the bond linger with the reader, Oreo's snout headed somewhere new, beckoning us to give up what we thought we know and take a chance on adventure, no matter the potential perils. But also, in a real way there is nothing else for the narrator to do but watch Oreo turn away from his master. Carosi's participant narrator both shows and skewers the human/non-human disconnect and his moments of naiveté helped make an environmental reading of the text possible. The leash, while made to serve us, tugs at us again.

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