9 | Interiority and Inner Enemy—Private Agonies Read Deeper Than External Whammies

It is a misfortune, in some senses: I feed too much on the inward sources; I live too much with the dead. My mind is something like the ghost of an ancient, wandering about the world and trying mentally to construct it as it used to be, in spite of ruin and confusing changes. But I find it necessary to use the utmost caution about my eyesight.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Carnality may determine whether a memoir's any good, but interiority—that kingdom the camera never captures—makes a book rereadable. By rereadable, translate: great. Your connection to most authors usually rests (Nabokov and a few others aside) in how you may identify with them. Mainly, the better memoirist organizes a life story around that aforementioned inner enemy—a psychic struggle against herself that works like a thread or plot engine.

Interiority moves us through the magic realms of time and truth, hope and fantasy, memory, feelings, ideas, worries.

Emotions you can't show carnally are told. Whenever a writer gets reflective about how she feels or complains or celebrates or plots or judges, she moves inside herself to where things matter and mean.

Early on in a childhood tale, an author may render consciousness awakening—that enduring, often-trivial first memory, through which a narrator blinks into being. Nabokov made such a moment so singular, its machinery almost speaks to or sparks my own such arrival, as if he described something I, too, had felt but never been able to articulate: "I see the awakening of consciousness as a series of spaced flashes, with the intervals between them gradually diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold." As you watch the narrator feel around the edges of consciousness for its "slippery hold"—probing for what really went down—you enter a singular set of psychic perceptions. But craving that "hold" or permanence in what's past is Nabokov's inner enemy.

Even a writer with gargantuan external enemies must face off with himself over a book's course. Otherwise, why write in first person at all?

The split self or inner conflict must manifest on the first pages and form the book's thrust or through line—some journey toward the self's overhaul by book's end. However random or episodic a book seems, a blazing psychic struggle holds it together, either thematically or in the way a plot would keep a novel rolling forward. Often the inner enemy dovetails with the writer's own emotional investment in the work at hand. Why is she driven to tell the tale? Usually it's to go back and recover some lost aspect of the past so it can be integrated into current identity.

Frank Conroy's inner enemy is his inability to maintain balance and control in the chaotic world of his feckless family without either disassociation or rebelling in self-destructive ways. *Stop-Time* shows the power of spacing out to protect a kid in pain. That inner blankness or emptiness provides the place where Conroy—a professional jazz pianist when I knew him—could shape "music" or form out of his environment's painful disorder. He enacts how a deprived kid *survives*, not just suffers, and it's through disassociation—a consciousness leaving time and place.

> For an hour or more I lay motionless in a self-induced trance, my eyes open but seldom moving. . . . In this state my ears seemed rather far away. I was burrowed somewhere deep in my skull.

And the undercurrent of the book is the aimless boredom of childhood. Since kids lack power and agency over much, they must embrace empty time. Conroy does it with bitterness.

> My philosophy, at age eleven, was skepticism. Like most children I was antisentimental and quick to hear false notes. I waited, more than anything else, waited for something momentous to happen. Keeping a firm grip on reality was of immense importance. My vision had to be clear so that when "it" happened I would know. . . . (A spectacularly unsuccessful philosophy since nothing ever happened.)

As his reckless parents and lackluster teachers failed to protect him, he gradually "slipped into the state of being in

trouble." The book opens with him as an adult driving drunk at a hundred miles per hour from London to his home in the suburbs. His outlaw streak, which we grow to love him for, also endangers him.

For Harry Crews, his fatherless state somehow cuts him off from forging a solid self. He started the book "because I've never been certain of who *I* am." He's a man stripped of identity, which he can only reclaim by reabsorbing his lost home place, partly through memories of the father who grew there and then died before Crews could be born. The book's stated emotional quest is to gather and utter old stories to fill in blanks in the writer with his old man's past and peoples. Otherwise, Crews might have to move through life as an undefined shapeshifter, a kind of poppet for other people's influences. He describes himself as a guy who goes from mask to mask, "slipping into and out of identities as easily as people slip in and out of their clothes." Even the voice we find so distinctive, he claims, is actually malleable as putty: as a reporter, listening to recorded interviews with film stars or truckers after the fact, his "own voice will invariably become indistinguishable from the voice of the person with whom I'm talking by the third or fourth tape. Some natural mimic in me picks up whatever verbal tics or mannerisms it gets close to."

In his macho-named book *Blood and Grits*, he confesses the shame of trying to be a literary man when he comes from illiterate sharecroppers: "Everything I had written had been out of a fear and loathing for what I was and who I was. It was all out of an effort to pretend otherwise."

This seems the place to mention that we later find out that

Crews's mother remarried while Crews was still a baby, and so till age six, the man he called "daddy" was a violent drunk uncle who terrorized the family. Before Crews was even conceived, the father he mourns lost one testicle to the clap, while working on a dredging crew in the Florida swamps. He caught it from "a flat-faced Seminole girl whose name he never knew and who grunted like a sow and smelled like something shot in the woods."

This unflattering portrait of the unflattering act helps describe the hard place we're in—a universe full of loud pigs and shot things you have to take whiffs of while walking around. It's a world told in muscular language and jam-packed with action of the grittiest sort.

But that lost world is also one where people hang tough together, and Crews sounds—above all else—so lonely and disconnected. That sense of unassailable community would seem to him like food to a starving man. Crews never seems to have had a pal like his daddy's on the dredging crew, a guy who took the old man to have one testicle lopped off. Before that, the friend engages the old man in a grim banter that binds them.

> The rhythmic stroke of the dredge's engine came counterpoint to my daddy's shaky voice as he told Cecil what was wrong.
>
> When Cecil finally did speak, he said, "I hope it was good boy. I sho do."
>
> "What was good?"
>
> "That Indian. You got the clap."
>
> But daddy had already known. He had thought of little else since it had become almost impossible for him to give water because of the fire that started in his stomach and felt like it burned through raw flesh

> every time he had to water off. He had thought of the chickee where he had lain under the palm roof being eaten alive by mosquitoes.

Because such stories are Crews's patrimony, the sole bonds that tether him to the planet, the carnal reality of the place and his daddy's suffering body have an immediacy we have to buy into.

For the sake of his own manhood, we sense, Papa Crews embodies the butch, hypertrophied male, and all of Crews's tough acts—from joining the marines and brawling and working as a carny to getting massive skull tattoos—seem to grow from the author's longing to live up to the mythic, über-mensch patriarch only met in photos and stories. "His is the gun that is always drawn; his is the head that is turned back under the whiskey bottle." That *always* is a kind of plaintive cry. Forgive me for getting all Freudian here, but for the father with one testicle to have a gun that is always drawn does sound like a son's own desperate wish for a macho old man.

One mark of capital-M Modernism is writers commenting self-reflexively on the fact that they're writing, as when a theater character breaks the fourth wall and directly addresses the audience. In a conflict such as Crews's, the process of telling a story in a way solves the psyche's core problem—in this, there's a poetic marriage of form and content. The medium is the message. Again, we hear Mantel in *Giving Up the Ghost* wrestling with her ability to incorporate her experience of the supernatural in a time when she'd be adjudged mad for the belief:

> So now I come to write a memoir. I tell myself, just say how you came to sell a house with a ghost in it. But this story can only be told once, and I need to get it right. Why does the act of writing generate so much anxiety? Margaret Atwood says, "The written word is so much like evidence—like something that can be used against you." I used to think that autobiography was a form of weakness, and perhaps I still do. But I also think that, if you're weak, it's childish to pretend to be strong.

Unless you confess your own emotional stakes in a project, why should a reader have any? A writer sets personal reasons for the text at hand, and her struggling psyche fuels the tale. Here's me in my first book, trying to explain how what I didn't know about my past haunted me:

> When the truth would be unbearable, the mind often just blanks it out. But the ghost of the event may stay in your head. Then, like a smudge of a bad word wiped off a school blackboard, this ghost can call undue attention to itself by its very vagueness. . . . The night's major consequences for me were internal. The fact that my house was Not Right metastasized into the notion that I myself was Not Right, or that my survival in the world depended on my constant vigilance against various forms of Not Rightness.

In *Night*, concentration camp survivor Elie Wiesel perhaps suffers as much from his own guilt about how he treated his dying father as he does from the depredations the Nazis inflict. While the sick old man in his death throes calls the author's name, the young man stays away, begrudging his father those

agonized cries, which eventually draw the blows of the SS: "I shall never forgive myself. His last word had been my name. A summons. I had not responded." Yes, the camp and its tortures overwhelm Wiesel, but this internal conflict deepens the story. So it's odd to me that in later editions of the book, Wiesel cut the passage, claiming it was "Too personal, too private, perhaps . . ."

The need to rout out my own inner demons is why I always start off fumbling through my own recollections. Only later, after several drafts do I engage in "research" by visiting old haunts and passing my manuscript around. The memories I've gnawed on and rehearsed are the ones most key to what's eating me up, and only those can help me to find a book's shape.

Reading George Orwell's masterful essay "Shooting an Elephant"—for my purposes a mini memoir—you see two halves of a man colliding. He doesn't try to justify his own actions in putting down a pricey animal in Burma as a British police officer during the Raj. He's not yet the political lefty who'll fight in the Spanish Civil War and pen *1984*, but serving overseas, he's started to sour on imperialism, and to empathize for the people he's paid to repress.

On the other hand, the populace baits and torments him—they're an obvious external enemy: "In Moulmein, in lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people—the only time in my life I have been important enough for this to happen to me."

But the inner struggle that shapes the piece is how that hatred begins to warp his insides. Orwell's own malice eats him up, so that he writes of the mocking young monks who languish on the streets and tea bars to tease him, "[I] thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts."

If you haven't read the piece, it follows a simple thread. An elephant in rut goes mad and kills a coolie. But by the time the crowd has jeered and cajoled Orwell into rushing to the scene, the calm, sleepy-looking critter is pulling up grass to eat. As he beats the dusty roots on his knees to get the dirt off, Orwell observes he has a "preoccupied grandmotherly air." Still, the crowd bullies Orwell into shooting the elephant with a rifle so small he has to fire over and over while the thing gasps and coughs gouts of blood. It's one of the most personally indicting scenes in memoir I've ever come across.

> When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick—one never does when the shot goes home—but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. . . . [A] mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old. . . . [He] sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth slobbered.

What was happening to Orwell at that time—the schism inside between disgust at his role in the Raj and his fury at the Burmese who hated him for his role—forges the story. As he says near the end, "You wear a mask, and your face grows to fit it." He offers himself no mercy with the ironic end statement that he was glad the animal had killed a coolie for "it put me legally in the right," adding, "I had done it solely to avoid looking the fool."

Try to think of Orwell writing the story solely as someone sympathetic to the Burmese people, and there'd be no emo-

tional power to what he was telling. He'd come off as someone selfishly defending his own actions. Once the reader identifies a vain or self-serving streak the writer can't admit to with candor, a level of distrust interferes with that reader's experience. In almost every literary memoir I know, it's the internal struggle providing the engine for the tale. Orwell's powers of description wring emotion from a reader for all players—the animal, the people, and the callow young police officer lost in fear and pride. Yes, the elephant embodies that old-school battle with nature that powered so many great novels, but it also mirrors Orwell's inner war.

10 | On Finding the Nature of Your Talent

Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point where he cannot distinguish the truth within him or around him, and so loses respect for himself. And having no respect, he ceases to love.

Fyodor Dostoevsky

I often find students in early pages showing themselves exactly opposite from how they actually are. The talented young poet who didn't want to bring her passionately felt love poems because they felt too "girlie" was an engagingly vulnerable and girlie individual. The superbrainiac tried posing as a working-class hero. One of the sweetest kids I ever knew wrote like a sociopathic hardass. Trying to help students diagnose their own blind spots, I often ask the following questions:

1. What do people usually like and dislike about you? You should reflect both aspects in your pages.
2. How do you want to be perceived, and in what ways have you ever been false or posed as other than who