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From Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*

“Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer; the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has to say. In *An American Tragedy* the situation is Dreiser’s America; the story is the pathological nature of hunger for the world. . . In a poem called ‘In the Waiting Room’ Elizabeth Bishop describes herself at the age of seven, during the First World War, sitting in a dentist’s office, turning the pages of *National Geographic*, listening to the muted cries of pain her timid aunt mutters from within. That’s the situation. The story is a child’s first experience of isolation: her own, her aunt’s, and that of the world.” (13)

The *story* Gornick speaks of here is what Carol Bly and Mary Hussman call “the story of thought.” It’s that guiding intelligence, that reflective voice that leads us through the narration telling us what s/he has a writer knew when, what s/he as a writer discovered about herself or himself at each stage of the game. If you don’t construct this eye, this “I” to lead us through your essay, you have only a situation, but you have no story. You have the facts. A report. The this-happened, then this-happened. But you don’t have the heart of the piece: the construction of a self, a self in transition from one way of being and knowing and living in the world, to another.

The situation you depict in your essay requires a vivid representation of scenes and contests, a world. You can’t be so inside the story that the reader can’t see the setting and the other characters. We need to watch the piece unfold like we’re watching a movie:

“The subject of autobiography is always self-definition, but it cannot be self-definition in the void. The memoirist, like the poet and the novelist, must engage with the world, because engagement makes experience, experience makes wisdom—or rather the movement toward it—that sounds. ‘Good writing has two characteristics,’ a gifted teacher of writing once said. ‘It’s alive on the page and the reader is persuaded that the writer is on a voyage of discovery.’ The poet, the novelist, the memoirist—all must convince the reader they have some wisdom, are writing as honestly as possible to arrive at what they know.” (Gornick, 14)

“But memoir is neither testament nor fable nor analytic transcription. A memoir is a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom. Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened. For that the power of a writing imagination is required. As V.S. Pritchett once said of the genre, ‘It’s all in the art. You get no credit for living.’

“The idea of the self—the one that controls the memoir—is almost always served through a single piece of awareness that clarifies only slowing in the writer, gaining strength and definition as the narrative progresses. In a bad memoir, the line of clarification remains muddy, uncertain, indistinct. In a good one, it becomes the organizing principle—the thing that lends shape and texture to the writing, drives the narrative forward, provides direction and unity of purpose. The question clearly being asked in an exemplary memoir is ‘Who am I?’ Who exactly is this ‘I’ upon whom turns the significance of this story-taken-directly-from-life? On that question the writer of memoir must deliver. Not with an answer but with depth of inquiry.” (91-92)