The Chorus is No Virgil



I've always been a Storyteller, hidden. We are all Storytellers. It's how we make sense of things and impose order on a chaotic flood of information and sensation and emotion. At best, stories aid understanding, provide a framework for appropriate response, and offer an accurate map of where we've been/are going. At worst, our stories spin manic spider webs of fantasy that keep us trapped in narratives that undermine our lives with confusion, poor judgement, and unintelligible mapping. Even when you put together a story that works well on all levels, is more or less verifiable…even then we know that someone else can arrange the same facts *Roshomon*-like into a narrative that bears scant resemblance to the order that works so well for you, but that somehow also withstands the understanding/response/mapping evaluations that you have to apply if any of you have any intention of being honest about our stories. <fn>Which proposition opens a whole other can of pintos, no doubt.</fn> And by you, of course, I mean me.

One motivator behind the i2b blog is to move the layers of stories out of my head and onto the page. <fn>Picture a half-century or so of sedimental buildup that requires systematic excavation to reveal both the fossil record and the cumulative context that describes a lifetime. A sedimental journey, if you will forgive.</fn> This layer by layer excavation is my pomo version of Dante's stroll through the underworld, each layer revealing more truthiness, with the trepidatious explorer gently guided by a wise and compassionate friend

through the horrors of Hell. That's where Dante got off easy. When I start dusting the dirt away from the hidden treasures to peel back and reveal the ossified detritus of a lifetime of stories, who is my guide? Bad news. My internal Greek Chorus of Stern Judgement and Doubt<fn>Who do you think you are, anyway? Getting a bit above ourselves, aren't we?</fn> stands ready to provide a running commentary/narrative. I hate to complain, but the Chorus is no Virgil, to say the least.

But let's leave the chorus to their disharmonious mutterings for a bit. I'm finally letting the Storyteller out to play. I'm not sure why it has taken so long, lifetime wise, to let this creature into the light. There are all kinds of good (and barely reliable) stories I can concoct to explain this away, but most likely it boils down to letting the GCoSJ&D control the narrative. Because that's what they/it live for: narrative control. The i2b project is all about regaining some control over the narrative. Their story grows tiresome.

After a lifetime of writing professionally, I began trying to Write this past summer after a personal apocalypse.<fn>Severe illness, near death experience, a month in hospital, two more months of recovery, &c. No biggie.</fn> Lying in bed, unable to move, too much time to think, I worked out a narrative of the whole ordeal in my head. I was not planning to Write,<fn>Chorus: "You're not a Writer. That's something that other people do. Who do you think you are?"</fn> but I was compelled. I somehow understood that the physical act of arranging the words on a page could neutralize the emotional charge the events had for me in a way that talking about it never could. And it worked. Now I can look at the entire apocalyptic episode as a story *over there*, something with almost no lingering emotional resonance. I put it over there, and did it on my terms. I can only assume that the Chorus was in a weakened condition at the time, too sick to interfere. Alas, it got better.

I can reliably confess that I, as a Storyteller, am an

Unreliable Narrator. My Twitter bio gives the game away: “An Unreliable Narrator seeking connection in a fragmented world.” And so the exercise is also about creating connectivity.<fn>Otherwise, why bother with the ‘in public’ part? </fn> We are not so different, you and I, despite so much irrefutable evidence to the contrary. Dancing on a few of the self-help/therapy/pop-psych buzzwords of the moment, I am attempting to create meaningful connectivity through vulnerability and a willingness to share my secret aspirations/fears/longings/&c. And I buy that notion, truly, and recognize that my success will rise or fall on the barometer readings of my honesty and authentic vulnerability. I mean that, no ironic wink about it.

But then comes a voice from the GCoSJ&D, probably a basso profundo, reminding me that these are no longer private mutterings, that anyone in the world could read this,<fn>And that even without my name appearing on the i2b site any two-year old with a LeapPad could figure out my identity in no time flat, and anyway, most anyone reading this is here because you know me in the first place, being that I am a nascent and unpublicized toiler in the bloggy vineyards.</fn> so watch what you say, bub. Then comes the mezzo to shriek, “What makes you think anyone cares what you think anyway!” And all together, they sing: “Come back inside where it’s dark and safe.”

The Storyteller resists the sirens.

For better or worse, I’ve taken the leap to subject my stories to scrutiny. I agonize endlessly over which word; how to construct the phrase/sentence/paragraph; how much to reveal; where to play with misdirection. Is my intention clear, my words suggesting exactly what I wish? Is the struggle even worth it, given that my tens of readers<fn>Someday!!</fn> will certainly refract my tale to fit frameworks I could hardly recognize or understand or anticipate? Does it even matter what I think a story means, or what the reader thinks it

means?

Most embiggendly…how much is too much? Certainly I owe my family a measure of privacy, and I really don't want to say something that makes me utterly unemployable or makes people cross the street when they see me coming. But I am striving for something *universal* in my ramblings. What's the point of trying to generate connectivity via vulnerability if I have to pull my punches to hide embarrassing specificity or unpopular opinion?

The Unreliable Narrator is a common element of literary analysis. Weighing how much/little credence to afford a storyteller becomes key to measuring the story itself.<fn>This may be even more critical to interpreting so-called creative so-called non-fiction, specifically as regards most of what passes as *truth* in the flood of memoiristic storytelling that publishers push like fast food on ravenous readers, volumes that I frequently find myself hurling wallward with a cry of "Oh, come on…Really?" Running with scissors, my ass.</fn> Not that it's as simple as Narrator-clearly-unreliable-therefore-story-untrue. I'll go ahead and assert that an Unreliable Narrator, who may in fact be at least semi-reliable and/or brutally honest, might convey *meaning* and create connection more effectively than a Reliable Narrator, if such a thing can be said to exist. Not for nothing, I'm also ready to suggest that all Narrators are, to some extent, unreliable.<fn>Like that's some kind of major scholarly leap. And if I can accept that, why are books flying wallward in the first place? The Chorus demands answers.</fn> Otherwise we would not have so much of that frustrating/delicious *Rashomon*-esque discrepancy that itself delivers incredible frisson vis a vis the understanding/response/mapping matrix even though/because none of us can really agree on what actually happened or what it purports signifier-wise. And if Nietzsche is to be believed,<fn>He was mad as a hatter, after all. Talk about unreliable.</fn> there are no facts, only interpretations. So

what’s a little gentle re-configuration of fact among friends?

Yesterday, I began writing this post. I was in a gloomy mood. There was no reason for the gloom, no real story available to explain it. I just get that way sometimes. But the Chorus abhors the explanatory vacuum, especially when my defenses are down. So it provided justification upon explanation for why I was blue, and isn’t this thing awful and that thing horrible, and what about that thing that person said/did/didn’t/implied/&c that one time, remember?

It was a singularly unpleasant day of writing. Reading back at the end of the day revealed carnage. There was blood everywhere; everything good and true was reduced to ash and dust mixed with tears and a Sazerac that spilled over my laptop. There was a tear in the knee of my corduroys and it seemed I had lost one sock, but happily still had both shoes. My gloomy mood darkened and I lay awake most of the night in agony. The Chorus sang vespers all night. “Come inside, it’s safer here”.

Had I revealed too much, crossed uncrossable boundaries? Was I afraid that I had exposed a darkness that would make me non grata, persona wise?

Nope. It was basically a bunch of true and banal stories, more or less embarrassing in their specificity. It was an honest accounting of unadulterated bullshit. And it was a whine.<fn>A ruling precept of this blog: No Whining.</fn> My soul-searching/searing revelations were empty, feeble ploys for pity. A recitation of facts, a litany of bath- and path-etic woe. Me, me, me, oh how I suffer. But worst of all, and the reason it all came out this way, is that it was a product of that goddamned Chorus. All my worst impulses, my doubts, my self-pity, my fears…all that baggage the Chorus sings about day and night. The Storyteller gave up narrative control.<fn>See above re: “stories [that] spin manic spider webs of fantasy that keep us trapped in narratives that

undermine our lives with confusion” &c.</fn>

There’s a running gag (sic) in the movie *Synecdoche, New York* that has Philip Seymour Hoffman’s character performing a ritual daily inspection of his morning stool to determine his health. The essay as it stood was the result of a psychic stool sifting. I flushed it this morning and began again on whatever question this ramble is trying to address.

So is this story going anywhere?<fn>At this point I refer the reader to The Immunity Manifesto Legal Disclaimer re: resolved endings, hatred of.</fn> Not really. We’re pretty much done here. I started writing yesterday to post tonight. The Chorus took control and it went badly. They/it/I/we have done so repeatedly over a lifetime around music, business, friendships, family relationships, and so on. But because I had promised to post here every Monday, giving up was off the table, and instead of letting the cursed GCoSJ&D have its way, I wrote about the Storyteller writing its way out of their shadow.<fn>For the moment, at least.</fn> The Storyteller intends to stay out in the light and deny the Chorus, who are in the end the most unreliable narrators possible. Nothing will ever shut those bastards up, but their claim on my attention weakens, one story at a time.

I won’t bet on how useful this ramble has been for the reader who makes it this far, but I cannot overstate the value it had for the Storyteller. Maybe that’s point enough.