

Conditions of a Narrator

by Ann Bogle

January 18, 1994

As I begin this writing, I notice that I have taken the internal posture of a guest lecturer or a commencement speaker. I detect neither malice nor forgiveness in my approach, yet there is a degree of anger, the judicious anger of a midlife Adrienne Rich. I am not at the middle of my life but in the midst of it, surrounded by too much paper and, I'm convinced, too little product. The eventuality of an audience can help give the paper form, but I do not believe that form should merely be imposed — to gratify expectations — nor do I think that any given form is inevitable.

I want to say: I do not think that form is suicide.

February 10, 1994

Adrienne Rich's midlife "judicious anger" is aimed at powerful people and at systems and is reflected in the forms of language she uses. I would define "anger at others" in terms of "conditions of a narrative."

What narrative? What narrative.

Point of view: "Commencement speaker"

Tone: "neither malice nor forgiveness"

As a speaker, Rich might summon "neither malice nor forgiveness" and not point to us by name. She might heave the *power* to forgive. She survived her generation's suicide (Plath, Sexton). In later years she has returned to and been allowed to return to mainstream American poetry as a wise, encompassing source. She wants an end to war. She wants peace.

"Paper" —> anger —> form —> end to suicide.

January 28, 1994

Ideas are unspeakable only if they are seen to impinge on the fantasies of others. Meaning is in the making, but we also make meaning a habit. I am not thinking here of commonplace meaning: a car equals a car. I am thinking of what happens when language ropes a life. We attribute metaphor to language, yet among writers, some writers, life is lived by the book. A representational word (car, wind, drink) gets carried away into life. It refers to you, your mother, your mania, your sex. In its broader manifestations, meaning leads to a dangerous wholeness that some writers check with fragmentation and polity. The writer may want to protect or change the world but is confined to an acquiescent resistance to fascism. Resisting fascism, the whole of it, requires acknowledging that part that is in us.

In Lorrie Moore's story, "Community Life," Olena has become her man. She begins to desire women, from his point of view, and to hate them, from hers, or vice versa: "She had become a rapist, driving to work in a car."

In my own writing I see metaphor mostly in retrospect, just as I see influence in retrospect. It is not enough to read an author to be influenced: one must become the author or discover that one has been with the author all along.

In 1985, when I first read and met Lorrie Moore, I was first elated (that such writing could exist) and then anxious to be caught in a spell. I valued authenticity more than anything else in writing and thought that hers was mixing with mine. I wrote the problem out in a short story. That story, "Tinges of Envy or How You Learn," has outlasted anything else I wrote during that time because, for me, it goes to the heart of something genuine and forceful.

It is sometimes necessary to write stories about writing stories.

It is sometimes necessary to write stories about people one knows.

When I copy life it is because I have one. When I don't, I invent. When I say "life," I mean the opposite: sex without domesticity. To tell a story, one must dwell in the neighborhood of one's own body,

yet I suspect that the very best writing occurs within sexless marriages.

January 31, 1994

"She had become a rapist, driving to work in a car." I refer to this passage as a metaphor. It could be a joke. It could be a dark joke. It could be an unspeakable idea. Olena's native anger suffused with her boyfriend's native lust turns her into a "rapist." Of course, figurative rape and actual rape are not the same thing, which is not self-evident.

Categories such as "date rape" and "lack of explicit consent" extend society's response to these as crimes. Yet the intellectual left has taken the position, in *Harper's* forums and *Esquire* editorials, that libidinal territory is being lost to hysterical crybabies. Disease, especially AIDS, and a certain brand of feminism could force libido underground, especially the libidos of young people who desire respect.

Desire for women is male; hatred for women is female, or vice versa. To imagine the power a man has — the power to rape — Olena must, ironically, induce a *liking* for women, call it up, not from an ancient or even a contemporary source. She must invent a liking for women in order to understand him.

Ignorance of one's self and one's desires is part of the real world, so it is reassuring for some readers, whether in the acted or written world, to know that ignorance will suffice.

There is a character in "Community Life" whose profile matches that of a man I knew in Madison, Wisconsin, where Lorrie Moore lives. He and his brother and another conspirator blew up a campus building to protest the war. All three were teenagers at the time. Carl, the man's real name, served twelve years for killing a graduate research assistant who had been working late in a lab. In the short story, a man is seriously injured in the explosion but does not die.

February 8, 1994

During my fall semester with Lorrie Moore, she urged me to "conform a little more," but I felt an affinity to truth, heavy baggage for any writer, and for a fiction writer insuperable. Had I written "Community Life," the male character would have been much as he was in life, a reluctant killer who had served his time. Moore doubted, perhaps, that readers could sympathize with a man who had killed someone for a cause or a girlfriend who forgave him. Perhaps she felt that maiming is (not) worse than murder. Perhaps she decided that the story should be about that.

In "Mugabe Western," a story I wrote during a bout of domestic invention, a dowdy young woman spends the night with a revolutionary African, not knowing that he is suspected of being a terrorist. The young woman wants love. It seems to her that her lot in life will be to have one-night stands with ugly or dangerous men. In her editing the story, Lorrie Moore crossed out "one-night stands" and wrote "her only other one-night stand."

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Who is the reader? Is it important, from a commercial point of view, to spare the reader indelicacies? Certain indelicacies send me shouting to the water, shouting about the water, shouting carrying water. It is difficult to imagine these as a form.

March 20, 1994

The shouting at the water gets drowned out.

I must make myself quieter to be heard.

Form at this point is format: font, spacing, page.

I get a really skinny text, one that loses its willingness to offend.

This is not to say that it is not harmful; it is to say that it seeks not to harm.

April 12, 1994

What I do formally is not new. Everything I salvage, the proximity of my sentences to one another, the stories I tell, my complaints, my excesses and absurdities all exist in variant form in someone else's mind. Nevertheless, people who have read my work have said that it

presents a view of what fiction will be. I see in it something old as well. There are names for the kinds of writing that take place in *Work on What Has Been Spoiled*, but what is the name for their existing side-by-side? How great is the need for that name? I think it is wrong to think that traditional forms of narrative, as we know them, will die out and be replaced by so-called innovative forms. Participation in writing is voluntary; so, therefore, is form.

The struggle to "find a form" has in some ways been a false one. Once I began to edit *Work ...*, I saw how automatically I was able to give certain lines new space: it was nearly effortless. By that I mean, it was not agonizing as it was when I originally composed it. The difficulty now lies in transferring the reading to others. The readers inherit the process.

In an introduction to her work, *Defoe*, Leslie Scalapino begins with war — the Gulf War and the Vietnam War — "and then from all periods of one's/my subjective field. ... One has to be fragile to be without protection in this reality. ... I wanted to get the writing to the point of being that still. ... One has to stop doing the social actions. At all."

Carol Maso describes her work, *AVA*, as "a living text. One that trembles and shudders. One that yearns. It is filled with ephemeral thoughts, incomplete gestures, revisions, recurrences and repetitions — precious, disappearing things. My most spacious form thus far, it allows in the most joy, the most desire, the most regret. Embraces the most uncertainty. ... No other book eludes me like *AVA*."

Maso's book, composed of very brief paragraphs arranged associatively, does follow the story of the central character, Ava, but, Maso writes, Ava's story was influenced by events in the world. The story assumed its final form during the "terrible weeks of the Persian Gulf War" and was accompanied by "a very deep longing for peace."

In my short story, "What Kiss," I replaced "Bush's war" with "raging war" to prevent it from seeming dated, fleeting. Yet that war happened only three years ago. I doubt it seems fleeting to the

people of Iraq. Many events discussed and referred to in *Work ...* will seem out of date, yesterday's news. I preserved them to remind ourselves of what happened then and as a gesture toward knowing our mind.

Not mentioned in this essay: Lyn Hejinian, Christa Wolf, Grace Paley, Amy Hempel.

Form should be the best response to the forces calling it into being.

— Mother Ann Lee (1736-1784), Founder of the Shakers

The ideal or the dream would be to come up with a language that heals as much as it separates.

— Helene Cixous

