



i

A trial run: May–August 1977, restoration of historic home on Florida Gulf Coast. No more than a full line.

Still early, says Harding, my last morning in Tarragona, and Gulf breezes were offering themselves through the open windows with all their old seductions. There I was, the house spacious and empty around me, no place for myself in it, considering a rhetorical problem only because, clearing out the last of my things a little after sunup, the typewriter in its film of dust, the briefcase harboring one or two scripts of my profession—words pushing at me—I’d happened across my résumé tucked away in a folder, ever ready. Out in the street, houses stood idling in their unpeopled quiet. Sidewalks of rosy old brick wound along in front of them greening over with moss, here and there mounds of scrap, the viscera of demolition and construction as familiar to me by now as the summer heat, intelligible, like entrails to augurers.

I erased “home” and pencilled in “structure,” put “total” in front of “restoration,” regretfully deleted it as excessive in context if not in fact, and, for “restoration,” substituted the word in *The Bicentennial Guide To Old Tarragona*, what all the more or less official watchdogs of the town’s historic district called it: “rehabilitation.” High time, this means, that certain building projects are recognized for what they are, more than stripped clapboard and cedar shingle roofs, nails and fresh paint, more than just somebody doing up an old house: there’s the moral impact of it all on the community. And how could it be otherwise? Even houses fall into disrepute—run down—and need uplifting now and then to their full potential for mirroring their pristine origins. Houses above all, those molds of human intimacy. Hang the regulation attire on the old derelict, give her a

good bath and a shampoo and a few shrewd tips on successful communication, and *voilà!* character regenerates.

That's about the way it went with me and the Boulet House, I must admit, but not as the gentlemen of the Committee for the Preservation of Historic Tarragona supposed. More brutally and before all else it had been a process of divestment, and self-divestment. Totalled: a self-world demolition. All the more reason to close off analytic peeps beyond the fashion code.

A résumé must always be available for viewing, and I was dallying, more or less guilelessly, with mine, the whole idea being—if I've got this right—to project an identity as carefully freed of narcissism as a realistic self-portrait, and as convincing on sight. Economy ought to be everything in this accounting of yourself, your time: no excesses allowed and, of course, no holes. Even when you're no longer seriously in the market, you tend to its standing as a public exhibit:

Elizabeth Harding Dumot
 12 Quarry Way, Athena, New York
 Birth: Colonus, Mississippi, December 5, 1935
 Marital Status: Divorced (two daughters)

—and so on, down through all the tags of professional fitness honed just to a page in the dozen or so years of my career. If you are bent as I am on keeping to essentials for the record, updating your résumé may involve a sacrifice or two.

And there it was: the apparent irrelevancy of the divorce, and the daughters, taking up an entire line. Just the space I needed to gloss my late project.

My problem: how to write into the public record an episode so adulterated by privacy. Not how to find a language for rendering experience; that I already had. Who doesn't nowadays? Nor how to make the private public; that I know to be impossible in the strict sense. Having no private language, I understand that there is in language no private experience. (I too call a cat a cat, Alice by Gertrude being Alice being Gertrude notwithstanding.)

To see if it still worked, after three hot months in the back of a closet, I rolled the sheet with my revised trial run on it into my old Royal and toyed with the keyboard as I continued pondering how to encode my summer intrusion in Tarragona's dust, and no

recourse to Faulkner. A machine is supposed to start where you leave off without anybody knowing the difference, which means in the case of a typewriter that you should be able to forget about it except at your fingertips. Keys sticking and bunching at every strike mire the thought in the mechanism, and, in one way or another, I'd been having far too much of that. All that back-breaking, joint-weakening summer, I'd come to expect trouble as sure as nightfall and time forever running out on me...now is the time...the quick brown fox.... Nudging up sticky keys I watched them strike, then hesitate and settle back into place like old women on stiff haunches...during this time...surely the quick brown fox as they used to say...the moving hand...during this time the reality of my possession marked mind and body as surely as the moving hand leaves its material traces...composing, but barely, till the keys were rebounding with only a hint of a drag...no remainder of myself with which to feel or to think...oh yes, even to wish to feel or to think, no one and nothing in the round of my body's toil and its nightmare sleep, only the eyes of others...unrelenting, etcetera., moving right along as if getting used to the lag of second thought, but still awkward, and slower than I remembered. I could see the Royal would be too erratic for anything now but the odd memo, or for drafting. Something with real finish, a public exhibit, would call for a more advanced machine. Still, the letters did line up on the page as unequivocally as ever, if a bit on the pale side, telling of a ration of idleness, the half-hour or more of unapportioned time before me, that made me laugh out loud.

Only those who have toiled long enough under duress that freedom requires a rehearsal can experience such lightness.

ii

Her laughter rolled—unembittered, I imagine—through that enormous, soft-toned room, rose through the light hues of the unencumbered expanse that was to have been her library, hung vibrant, and died as cleanly as sound at the bidding of the conductor's hand. The wide-planked floor on which she sat cross-legged, hunched over the typewriter (still in work clothes for the final touches), glistened darkly around and away from her down to the other end where the dress for her drive back North was sus-

pended from the refinished mantle, palely yellow fine-spun cotton catching the sun and, now and again, a little breeze from the open windows. She snapped out the page of type and dropped it whole into the trashbag slumped glossily in the middle of the floor, secured the Royal in its housing and clicked the hardboard case shut. A crack showed between top and bottom half, an old lack of alignment in the closure that needed a strap for a really snug fit.

iii

Pencil and clean sheet of paper in hand, she says, I climbed up into one of the high dormer windows and fell into a study of the striations of shadow the louvered shutter, the very one I'd had such a time with, was laying over me while I entertained my problem more, as they say, constructively. It was a matter of keeping the record straight, maintaining control of the point of view others might take on me—not to give out any particular image of myself, only to limit the range of them.

We've all received the message that as human media—for we're all projectors, aren't we?—we're responsible for our public face. It's up to us to regulate the flow of projections. The give, that is, and the take. The give-and-take. My love of truth (and the subjectivity of it never bothered me a whit, even before it became next to mandatory) is so strong I can paint myself as an old-fashioned intellectual without lifting eyebrows other than my own. But telling the truth is out of the question in the media realm; nobody's interested in that kind of detail for its own sake.

Slats of sunlight snuggled over my arms and legs, breezes whiffled, and here I sat serenely tackling the problematic character of private life existing under the force of public intercourse, the place that remains private because it cannot be shared in language or otherwise, the place that is, quite simply, your body. No matter what the strategies of possession, including identification, I can't be your body and you can't be mine—well, "tackling" gets in altogether the wrong picture and, as much as I like the idea, so does "dallying." Dawdling is more like what I was doing up in that oversized window seat a little past eight a.m. my last morning in Old Tarragona. Dawdling, incredible.

Privacy: the necessary material condition of all existence, not to be confused of course with “the right to privacy,” which is a public matter to be talked about, talked to death and back again, and is. A political matter therefore. And public intercourse: that play of pure power whereby we are made, and made to love it, to hate it, to neuter and to neutralize it in accordance with sexualized specifications of feeling. I am certainly not alone in observing how words penetrate us, gathering like tumescence, proliferating like nuclear warheads (“nuke you” is bound to succeed “fuck you” on walls), collecting value like numismatic coins, pleasures promised like bathing in the ocean or drinking and eating and making love. As if to follow a natural law for merely being and continuing to be whatever we are now becoming, the repetitions of natural language worm their way to the very gut of privacy. Words: the communal wasteproducts of our privacies. I rapidly settled on: May–August 1977, *A Critique of Signing in Historic Restorations*. More or less a lie in the usual sense.

The unobtrusive fit of each piece, however, was still not all it should be. The lie ought to be as natural for the public as a good enough mother for her child. And with that I had a stroke of genius: insert “feminist” in front of “critique.” Just as divorce with two children legitimized my female sexuality, so would a feminist project of any kind validate my female intellectuality. As irrelevancies go, not a bad *quid pro quo*. It had economy, and a state of the art machine would make a crisp job of it all in a single line. Outside, workmen arriving in their pickups rolled cautiously to a stop like trespassers, joviality a bit strained as befits a Monday morning in August, the weekend closed like a skimmed chapter behind them. Up in my niche I followed their rites over tool boxes and coffee and chitchat, as if seeing not from the vantage point of a second-story nineteenth-century window but through the moving perspective of my time—as if I were already looking back at it all from the evening of that day on the road somewhere, or from a moment in a week hence, or a year.

Next day, Tuesday, would be garbage day on Valencia Street—toward the very end I had after all timed things right. I folded the paper with my stroke of genius on it for saving. Called on to account for my time, I could; no holes showing.

Within the hour, after closing the sale of her restored property in an elegantly cool lawyer's suite on Hernando Plaza, Harding will walk into the bright heat of Tarragona's rush hour tapering off, past the aggressive roar of office-bound automobiles, past a lumbering city bus or two carrying the black and white women who make their living a few blocks farther west, downtown, behind meal counters and at checkout lines of stores sapped by the smart shopping malls that ring the city now. Rehabilitation is nowhere imminent here on the margins of the Historic District; viability is elsewhere. In Tarragona's old commercial heart, municipal government, too, still churns its round of things scandalously running down. And I wonder even now, as I write this: driving back North where her children are, up the savage highways, would she be heading home or leaving it, here, at the edge of the moss-strung Plaza, the transfer point, where the women bound for their meager jobs in those unregenerate failing businesses get on and off the slow hot buses that lumber especially for them it seems?

The whereabouts of home. It's a question (among others) that all of Harding's stories pose. Going by the book, one way or another it would seem to be my job to answer them. It's what's expected. The buck, as those in authority like to say, stops here.

Quite so. I'm well aware, however, by virtue of training (and by inclination, too) that I'm not to intrude on you. I understand that your satisfaction depends on my discretion, my delicately nuanced absence—you know, those suggestive sounds of an author scuttling in the boards, the subtle judgments, modulations of tone and narrative angle that point you to the meaning in it all. Clearly, then, given my intentions, I should set the record straight immediately so as to foreclose the certainty of misunderstanding between us, ill feeling. I intend—as in the following—to make spaces for myself under the heading *psycheme*, the name tells all. Spot one and I'll be there. Everything else will show up in the text.

psycheme

In my utopian moments I imagine myself as part of the clutter that accumulates in your daily life, things getting out of place like the nail scissors, unanswered letters, bills, tax records, dark glasses, keys, throat lozenges, library cards, empty bottles, etc. Depending on how much it bothers you and how much time you've got, you stop every now and then and put it all away, make a clean sweep and start all over. Get rid of the clutter distracting you, place it all where you can use it, or not, as you prefer, and get on with your life. I envision myself, at such moments, releasing you from the distraction that builds up around the clutter of meaning, from your inevitable desire for something more revealing, from your expectations that I'll somehow clear up the mess. Suppose that, before desire intensifies, it were periodically allayed—nothing more. I'm here to amend the old contract between us: I'm coming out of the woodwork.

Psycheme: Call it a design for giving little close-ups of the author, self-epiphanies, let us say, rather than the usual fictional variety; self-offerings, my minimal units; the smallest parts of Jael B. Juba having any meaning. What I'm after is a kind of self-knowledge, and, so, instead of acting like God felt everywhere but nowhere visible, I want to be seen, seen along with Harding, but in a place of my own. The woman called Harding (a family name) tells non-stop about restoring an antebellum home on the Florida Gulf Coast, and as long as she's talking there's no room in her presence for me, Jael B. Juba, the author. I want to know where I, always in her shadow, am, to take a good look at myself—you might say I have a desire, not unlike yours, for authorial revelations. As author and reader ours is a problematic relationship, but all the more reason why bouncing the Dionysian pieces of an old, old world between us requires a new, more realistic fit between you, me, and Harding.

Suppose you were able to read her restoration stories with no more regard for me than if I had called the wrong number. Of course, I prefer to be something other than a minor irritant in your life, but, as Harding might put it, it takes two to tangle. Old habits die hard, I know.

This is the plan: As if installing a full-length glass, I'll stand here like this, wholly exposed for your inspection, let you see off and on precisely where I am and what I'm all about, at least at the moment I appear before you. You'll get used to these close encounters, and with enough little studies from all different sides, you'll come to know me as naturally as anybody else in your life. On my part, I'll curb all urges to repeat myself (since analysis of me is not our motive), but I mean to assume enough poses to allow you to form a kind of hologram of me. That, of course, is what I'm after: the hologram. Not exposure of myself piece by piece. Nor will I let only my best sides show (that would hardly be fair); you'll have enough shots of me to know me like a book. (An added bonus: There'll be no need to appear on talk shows or give public readings to promote my work; I won't even need my picture on the dust jacket, I'll be making appearances right here before your eyes.) Thus captured, transported as it were to your viewpoint, I can't fail to see my authorial identity from where I sit.

Remember: Another page, another psycheme. It's only me.

v

Self-removal, says Harding, comes as easily to me as though it were of my essence. Résumé tucked away again in folder with addendum clipped to it, blank paper in briefcase with writing implement, and me sliding out of my work clothes as confidently as if the graffiti of my summer in Tarragona could be moulted. Disposal of same in trashbag. Then, to my travel outfit: slipping on my yellow summer dress meant to double as the unquestionably successful woman's casual openness to Southern warmth. Last thing, I tied up the plastic trashbag and set it out front for next day's pick-up. Went back in for the typewriter and briefcase and wedged them into their allotted space in my car, every inch packed with tools, clothing, books (none opened), useful odds and ends: coils of rope, the polyfoam mat that had been my bed for the final weeks and was still good, surplus hardware, some old and quite interesting.

I crunched along the drive, new shells still shifting underfoot, to the back yard—nearing 8:30—and on out through the alley gate. No one about back there, not even a bird calling.

psycheme

Here I am. But what is “here”? Sooner or later these days that problem is bound to come up, if not “who is this author?” or “what is implied about her?”, then “what are these traces? who leaves this track of herself?” Attempts, in so many words, to place an agent: godlike (even if Nobodyatall) when you desire authority; or not an author really, just a writer, merely somebody at work making marks on paper, when you don’t. Regulator, or means of production, or something in between—the mystery of whodonit haunts every text.

Already I find I’m becoming as interested in you as in myself: In the drama of our interaction, what kind of character will you turn out to be? What can I, stepping out of our usual relationship, make of you? Being on such familiar footing with me—so personally involved—maybe you can work out a way to accept my presence somewhat as, say, the ongoing, piecemeal fulfillment of a child’s need for his/her parents releases him/her to separation from them. Or, at a later age: as sexual gratification may spin a lover off to the heroics of eccentricity. All depends on what you do with my coming and going. The quality of intimacy from which we both shrink.

Such demystification puts us on the same level—you and me, me and Harding—all of us suspended in the same fictional medium. The odd thing is how my thoroughgoing knowledge of Harding’s stories has resulted in no loss of interest on my part. My interest in them has changed, that’s all, quieted, taken on a more distanced dimension. They have become a text for me, one I live with and, yes, love, and hate—hence my title, *THE RESTORATIONIST: Text One*. What began (long before circumstances brought Harding and me together) as a passion for stories, a world to lose myself in, hardened to a strange passion where I am ever present to myself, as solidly (if blindly) as if her shadow, taking in my substance, had disengaged from her. Passion either dies or fixes at the pitch of its strength. In the latter mold it becomes an intellectual passion.

Back to the text.