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*FORMS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
NARRATION IN
SCANDINAVIAN LITERATURE*

a cura di / edited by

Massimo Ciaravolo, Sara Culeddu,
Andrea Meregalli, Camilla Storskog

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POLYPHONY AND STRATEGIES IN TARJEI VESAAS'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DISCOURSE

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1. Introduction: the limits of autobiography

The lively debate on autobiography during the last decades does not only express the will of a normative reflection on literary genres but calls for wider consideration, involving both the author's standpoint and the relationship between reality and fiction in literature. It appears obvious that these two aspects – the role of the author in the literary text and the need or possibility of discerning reality from fiction in literature – imply each other.

The critical reflection concerning the position of the author himself in the text can be summed up in a simplifying overview. If we start with the so-called School of Prague and the consequent critical focus on the linguistic aspects of the text, proceed through the statement of the distinction between implicit and explicit author (Booth 1961), and end up at the post-structuralist notion of «death of the author» in 1968 (Barthes 1984) or the consideration of the author as «function of the text» the following year (Foucault 2001), the real author seems to undergo a gradual, theoretical estrangement from the text, if not a «degradering» (Kjerkegaard, Skov Nielsen, Ørjasæter 2006: 11; degradation), which changes its connotations and acquires new meaning with Philippe Lejeune's work on autobiography, which first appeared in the 1970s (1975; 2005). On the one hand, the empirical writers with their own identities and names return to the centre of the literary debate, getting dragged into the interpretation of their works, while on the other we witness an outburst of literary experiments on the boundaries between reality and fiction and of a critical debate on the literary text as a hybrid place combining apparently incompatible planes. Consequently, the concept of autofiction arises and branches out from this theoretical and philosophical unrest (Colonna 2004; Gasparini 2008; Ahlstedt, Karlsson 2011).

This study will analyse *Båten om kvelden* (1997a; *The Boat in the Evening*, trans. by Rokkan 2003), originally published by Tarjei Vesaas in 1968, in the light of recent theories on autobiography, involving different texts that take part in the author's autobiographical discourse, such as *I Midtbøs bakkar* (The Hills of Midtbø) and *Båten om dagen* (The Boat in the

Daytime), which date respectively from 1974 and 1976, by Halldis Moren Vesaas (2007)¹, and *Tarjei Vesaas om seg sjølv* (1985; Tarjei Vesaas about Himself) by Olav Vesaas. Such an investigation will lead the scholarly studies on Vesaas into a yet unexplored territory, and it will also call back into question those very theories on autobiography, as they will be applied to a kind of writing that occupies a place before and beyond the definitions of autobiography as given by Lejeune and his successors. Prior to the normative work on autobiography and its 'deviations', *Båten om kvelden* seems to create a totally new model of autobiography, complying only with the writer's deepest requirements. This text then induces us once again to consider the question of what autobiography is, and how it is possible to define it. As Paul de Man observes:

[...] autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm. [...] Autobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution. (1979: 920-921)

In this essay I intend to approach the analysis of *Båten om kvelden*, and the passage entitled *Slik det står i minnet* («As It Stands in the Memory»), in particular, through a 'polyphonic' path leading, from outside to inside, towards the author's most intimate voice. I will begin by observing Halldis Moren Vesaas's attempt to let the voice of the author move in from outside through a sort of 'collective autobiography'; next, I will present the relationship between the voices of Tarjei and Olav Vesaas in the collection of autobiographical writings titled *Tarjei Vesaas om seg sjølv*; and, as a conclusion, I will focus on *Båten om kvelden* and on the polyphony within *Slik det står i minnet*, paying particular attention to the autobiographical strategies, the author's standpoint, the active involvement of the reader, and the relationship between reality and fiction.

2. The transfiguring voice of the other: collective autobiographies by Halldis Moren Vesaas

A few years after Tarjei's death in 1970, Halldis Moren Vesaas wrote two books of memories which actually tell a collective history: *I Midtbøs bakkar* and *Båten om dagen*. A poet and leading figure of the cultural life of

¹ These texts are collected in a single volume entitled *I Midtbøs bakkar. Minne frå eit samliv* (The Hills of Midtbø. Memories from a Lifetime Together) in 2007. In this essay I intend to use this latest edition.

Norway since the Thirties, Halldis Moren conciliates various needs in this text: the need to gather her own memories as an intellectual, an artist, a woman, a mother and a wife, and the need to tell the story of an era of radical transformation for Norway (from the Thirties, through World War II, to the participation of intellectuals in the construction of modern Norway) but, above all, the need to let Tarjei Vesaas, the man and the writer, surface through the events, the documents, and, not least, through his own voice.

Halldis, while not surrendering her own voice, prefers to put Tarjei in the foreground, almost overlapping her voice with the voice of her husband. This intention already transpires from the titles: *I Midtbøs bakkar* is the title of a slightly «murky» poem (H.M. Vesaas 2007: 7) by Tarjei Vesaas from 1953 (T. Vesaas 2007: 165-166), while the other title, *Båten om dagen*, clearly echoes that of Tarjei's last work, *Båten om kvelden*, which is also his most admittedly autobiographical book². The evening boat is transfigured through Halldis's voice into a daytime boat. The light of day that enlightens her pages may not be related to a tale of a younger age, but rather to the narrating voice and its intent: a clear, simple, positive word meant to offer the reader coherent images, strongly relying on their 'meaning' and aimed at enlightening the landscape of past life. In the same way, the 'evening' in Tarjei Vesaas's book, a metaphor of old age, is not an object of the narration (which dwells principally on memories of childhood and youth), but rather a point of view, a place and a time from which to turn and look back, receive, compose and restore an image of a life, which necessarily appears «splintra» (splintered) in his own eyes. Halldis embraces the perspective of light and wholeness against dusk and fragmentation, and her book appears as a bright (auto)biography in response to her husband's crepuscular autobiography. What produces this difference in brightness is both the nature and the intention of the two narrations: while Tarjei's text is a journey through his own history and interiority, during which his discretion drives him to *hide*, Halldis's text purposes to *show* the whole world a collective experience, which sometimes assumes the traits of a fairytale, because of the harmonious way in which events are linked to each other. The doubling into a narrating self and a narrated self, even on a chronological plane, is typical of autobiographical writing and offers an opportunity for reorganisation that Halldis uses in order to reconstruct the story in the desired light:

² Both titles seem to be borrowed from Tarjei and converted from a *murky* tone to a *bright* one. As regards *I Midtbøs bakkar*, Halldis Moren writes that: «[...] når det vart eg som skreiv den boka, vart det ei bok om livet i dei helt konkrete bakkane. Bakkar som for meg aldri har vore noka anna enn det dei er [...]» (H.M. Vesaas 2007: 9; [...]) since I was the one writing this book, it would become a book about our life in the absolutely concrete hills. Those hills that, to me, have never been anything but what they are [...]).

Når noko som har vore godt er definitivt slutt, gjer minnet det enda betre enn det var. Minnet snur og vender på det det har samla, tilslører somt og forgyller anna, skyv unna det det helst ville ikkje skulle vore der, drar det det er glad i fram i lyset. (H.M. Vesaas 2007: 241)

When something beautiful is ultimately over, memory makes it even better than it was. Memory twists and rearranges what it has collected, it hides something while it gilds something else, it deletes the unwanted while bringing the dearest into light.³

The text by Halldis Moren Vesaas is an autobiography whose reflexive aspect (*autós*) is apparently parenthetical, as it is a narration of her own self *and* of another person, in which she ostensibly focuses on the other while actually reaffirming herself. Is it possible to write the truth about someone who seems to be a part of ourselves? Halldis raises the question many times, afraid that her delivery, her transmission of knowledge may be marred by betrayal:

Det å teie om det mest intimt personlege var elles noko som hørte miljøet til, Tarjei hadde den same blygskapen sjølv. Det er blant anna det som gjer at den som skulle kjenne han best av alle må spørje seg sjølv: kjende eg han i grunnen? (H.M. Vesaas 2007: 35)

To keep quiet about one's most personal things was a typical trait of the environment and Tarjei shared such discretion. Also because of this, the person who should have known him better than anyone else keeps on asking herself: did I really know him?

Kven er du i grunnen, du som eg skulle kjenne så godt? (H.M. Vesaas 2007: 127)

Who are you, really? You, whom I should know so well?

Stundom sa eg til han: Du skulle skrive dine memoarar. Men nei, det ville han ikkje. Eg trur han ville kjent det som eit diskresjonsbrott, og det var noko av det siste han ville gjere seg skuldig i. (H.M. Vesaas 2007: 282)

Sometimes I used to tell him: you should write your memoirs. But no, he did not want to. I think he would have considered it a lapse of discretion, and that was the last thing he would have wanted to blame himself for.

Her tale of life is thus hybrid and polyphonic, since the voices of the two protagonists, integrated in a memory plot reconstructed from the overall point of view of the author, intersect and interact, leaving the reader with several questions about the lights and shadows of memory but also about the nature of characters in autobiography and about the possibility of an autobiographical truth: if the author feels a 'duty of honesty' towards her dead husband, for example, we can ask ourselves which of the two characters is more fictional, Halldis or Tarjei, the 'I' or the 'you'.

³Translations are mine if not stated otherwise.

3. The inaudible voice of the other: autobiographical collaboration in *Tarjei Vesaas om seg sjølv*

Olav Vesaas's text, which I will briefly introduce, can be considered as a step forward on an imaginary path towards the most intimate voice of Tarjei Vesaas. It is once again a text which contains a mixture of voices, thus a polyphonic construction in its way, but also a very different operation compared to Halldis Moren's.

Tarjei Vesaas om seg sjølv is in fact edited, more than written, by his son Olav. The latter actually just writes a brief declaration of intent and some short passages to introduce or link different fragments; apart from that, he lets his father speak. The text is in reality a collection of writings by Tarjei Vesaas, in which he focuses on himself. One, in particular, entitled *Om skrivaren* (About the Writer), is a previously unpublished autobiographical tale, which Tarjei often used on public occasions to talk about himself and his writing and which Olav scattered in bits and pieces throughout the book as a sort of ongoing theme. The remaining material belongs instead to very different genres: newspaper articles signed by Tarjei Vesaas, sketches, letters, unpublished manuscripts and pages from his diaries, but, above all, short stories, poems and excerpts from novels.

Olav's voice is thus audible throughout the selection and in the reorganisation of the written material, and is, at the same time, both a decisive and an almost inaudible voice, while Tarjei's prevails. It is known that an autobiographical text is characterised both by the narrative element and the selective/constructive one, as both contribute to the final result, and the voice of Olav, although inaudible, makes itself felt. The son reconstructs the story but lets his father tell it, and we hear their voices cross each other, especially in the selection of those passages that the son *considers* autobiographical, without their being explicitly so. Olav *reads* and *understands* them as autobiographical (cf. de Man 1979), suggesting that other readers do the same.

Olav's purpose with this book is to give voice to «Tarjei Vesaas's teiende tale om seg sjølv» (O. Vesaas 1985: 9), his father's «silent discourse on himself», and in doing so he produces a text in which Tarjei is simultaneously subject and object, both author and theme. We confront a piece of autobiographical writing that is not an autobiography: we read what Tarjei Vesaas is supposed to have written about himself, but it is precisely the subject's narrative will that is lacking, while such an autobiographical project takes place in what fatally happens to be Tarjei Vesaas's last book, namely *Båten om kvelden*.

4. Voices of the self: *Båten om kvelden* as an inner autobiography

Båten om kvelden is composed of two introductions in verses, *Første fortale* (First Preface) and *Andre fortale om dette splintra biletet frå den seine båten* (Second Preface about this Splintered Picture from the Loitering Boat),

and sixteen numbered prose texts with lyrical inserts. Even before the publishing stage, the author seems to question the genre of his literary creation. In a relatively late version of the *Second Preface*, the subtitle reads «om ein splintra roman frå den seine båten» (about a splintered novel from the loitering boat)⁴. The text is therefore temporarily defined as a «splintered novel», a definition that will be removed and substituted, or better bypassed, in the definitive version with the fragmented image conveyed by the loitering boat, namely the image of a life.

Even if the book is hard to classify, it is immediately perceived as an autobiography, and when the author is asked to write an ‘orientation’ to the text for the publishing house, he answers that the definition of «indre sjølvbiografi» (inner autobiography, which does not come originally from the author but from a radio interview with the editor Brikt Jensen), is the most suitable one⁵.

To define one’s own autobiography as «inner» means emphasising exploration instead of exposition, trying to hide and reveal oneself at one and the same time. As Tarjei Vesaas observes:

Ville fortelje litt om meg sjølv – med I wanted to tell something about my-
mange om-skrivinga. Kunne liksom ve- self – with many circumlocutions. It
re høveleg tid til dette no etterkvart. [...] seemed as though the moment had
Forfattaren er vel gjerne tilstades i alle come. [...] Of course the writer is always
sine bøker, men her skulle det vera litt present in all of his books, but here I
nærare enn før. (O. Vesaas 1995: 397) wanted to be even closer.

Tarjei Vesaas resorts to some autobiographical concepts, such as the reprocessing of personal experience, writing about the self, memory and time, without ever explicitly lending his own name to the character, who paradoxically becomes more objectified the more he is identified with the author, and is introduced with the impersonal «ein» (one) in moments of maximum intimacy. Furthermore, he never defines his text as a real autobiography, but as an «inner» one at best. In other words, Vesaas maintains an ambiguous approach to the autobiographical genre, probably because of the clash between an authentic ‘autobiographical urge’ and the legendary discretion that distinguishes, if not defines, Tarjei Vesaas as a public figure and writer.

Vesaas’s discretion and shyness are, in fact, some of the main features of the ‘myth’ that arises around his person: in an article of 1969 entitled

⁴ My italics.

⁵ «Brikt Jensen i Gyldendal har kalla det ein “indre sjølvbiografi”. Det kunne ikkje eg komi på – men det er ikkje langt frå sanninga» (from *Om Skrivaren*, O. Vesaas 1985: 230; Brikt Jensen of Gyldendal defined it an “inner autobiography”. I would not have come to it – but it is not far from the truth).

Myten om Vesaas (The Myth of Vesaas), which is also, or mainly, an essay on *Båten om kvelden*, Dag Solstad invites the reader to a discussion about the canonised image of his elder colleague. Solstad starts from the relation of trust established between the writer and his readers and critics, and states that, when we read, we carry with us Vesaas's mighty personal image. Such an image is not a disturbing element standing *between* the book and the reader, but a necessary and unavoidable part of the book, something characteristic. Solstad writes:

[...] i hvert fall ville jeg savne noe helt [...] I at least would feel as if something
 vesentlig hvis jeg skulle lese for eksempel essential were missing if I was to read for
 Fuglane, Det store spelet og Båten om example *The Birds*, *The Great Cycle* or *The*
 kvelden uten å ha mitt bilde av den *Boat in the Evening* without having the
 skrukkete mannen fra Vinje med meg. image of the wrinkled man from Vinje in
 (1969: 41) front of me.

One cannot help noticing how Vesaas's need to disappear causes the person of the author to be felt as 'essential' during the reading experience. Solstad's essay was published almost at the same time as Barthes's essay about the «death of the author» (1968), but while Barthes wants to free the text from the standpoint of the author, aiming to indicate its independence from the encumbering author, Solstad stresses the value of carrying with us the image of the writer during the reading. Solstad maintains that in *Båten om kvelden* Vesaas breaks with his own myth in order to let his writing fulfil his autobiographical needs, especially in the most intimate chapters of the book, namely the first and the fifteenth prose passages, *Slik det står i minnet* and *Tonen* (*The Melody*), dedicated to the memory of his father and mother. «I disse kapitler er Vesaas naken, så maskeløs naken som et menneske kan være» (Solstad 1969: 43; In these chapters Vesaas is as denuded and unmasked as a man can be).

But forty years after Solstad's article, in his study on Vesaas entitled *Skyggebilder* (2007; *Shadows*), Kjell Ivar Skjerdingsstad interprets the writer's timidity in terms of 'coquetry', of course not referring to the biographical person but to his writing, a writing – according to Skjerdingsstad – of partially hiding and covering in order to attract his readers's attention and awaken their curiosity, senses and intuition. Veils and masks, layers of snow falling down to cover silhouettes and figures, crepuscular lights to make the profiles uncertain, cause his readers to whet their vision, trapped as they are in a strategy of seduction and beauty (Skjerdingsstad 2007: 24-25, 65-66).

This strategy reaches its peak in Vesaas's most personal and autobiographical book, where we witness the deployment of all the motifs that are dearest to the author: the pre-adolescent young man, the horse, the birds, the snake, the lake, the current, the boat, the fir forest. Recurring motifs, personal refrains, which reveal themselves as masks of the self,

worn to unmask oneself. If it is true that «Ein sjølv står i bøkene i alle slags forkledningar» (from *Om skrivaren*, O. Vesaas 1985: 144; We are present in our own books under any kind of disguise), in *Båten om kvelden* Vesaas uses these *figures of the self* to narrate himself in an organic way that contrasts with the splintering within the plot, which instead mirrors the work of memory. In *Båten om kvelden* the autobiographical need finds a «samlande grunnplane», a cohesive ground for the fragments of memory: «Det er den same hugen som viser seg frå ymse sider» (O. Vesaas 1995: 397; It is the same spirit that shows itself from different perspectives), as the writer states⁶.

Båten om kvelden is a narration of the self where the self contains both life and writing, as Steinar Gimnes observes:

Når Vesaas nemner sjølvbiografiske kategoriar som “minne, omskrivne opplevingar, sterke kjensler og draumar”, kan vi også oppfatte dette som litterære motiv, som representerer Vesaas’ forfatterskap. ‘Sjølvbiografisk’ knyter vi da til dikteren Vesaas, ikkje først og fremst til den biografiske personen. I stor grad er det slik i *Båten om kvelden*. Leseopplevinga er prega av gjenkjenning av motiv frå forfattarskapet, som dannar eit bilde av ein forfattarinstans. Boka er framfor alt ‘sjølvbiografisk’ i denne tidinga. (2013: 438)

When Vesaas mentions autobiographical concepts such as “memory, reprocessed experiences, strong feelings and dreams”, we can acknowledge them also as literary motifs that represent Vesaas’s writing. Therefore we link the adjective ‘autobiographical’ primarily to Vesaas the writer, and not to his biographical persona. Most of all, this is what happens in *The Boat in the Evening*. The reading experience is characterised by the identification of motifs present in his entire production, which gives us the image of a writer-standpoint. The book is ‘autobiographical’ mainly in this sense.

Vesaas seems to ask his ideal reader to recognise him and carry him along during the reading: not the «skrukkete» Vesaas from Vinje, as Solstad suggests, but his books, his motifs, his masks.

5. Reflections of memory and reflections of the self in *Slik det står i minnet*

The passage *Slik det står i minnet* shows a recurrent triptych in the writing of Vesaas, composed of a father, a son and a horse caught in a working context. Apart from this passage from *Båten om kvelden*, this ‘refrain-motif’ is also found, for example, in the novel *Det store spelet* (1997b: 7-202; *The Great Cycle*, trans. by Rokkan 1967) of 1934, considered as autobiographical by most critics (T. Vesaas 1997b: 7-202), and in the poem *Hesten* (2007: 40-41; *The Horse*, trans. by Greenwald 2000: 14-17), in the collection *Kjeldene* (The

⁶ All quotes from O. Vesaas in this paragraph are Tarjei Vesaas’s own statements, unless otherwise indicated.

Sources) of 1946, where the writer stages, in different ways, from different perspectives and with different results, the inner conflict of a boy who has to choose between following the path and work expectations prescribed by his father and community, i.e. farming, and taking an alternative road, a personal and creative one. The conflict between working the soil and writing, between the continuation and the break of family tradition, is enacted. The father represents authority, a knowledge and a duty both silent and natural; the boy, on the other hand, embodies the yearning for dreams, escape and verbal communication; the horse, in the end, is the figure where all characters and motifs from the mentioned texts converge and reflect, because of its physical presence and its wide symbolic range (Culeddu 2013: 67-84).

This is the scenery of *Slik det står i minnet*: a fir forest with the three characters at work to open a path through the snow, under the falling snow. The silence is absolute and the light is uncertain, with walls of mist enclosing the landscape. The focus continuously shifts between outside and inside, and the subject is, alternately, «det store barnet» (the big boy), «eg» (I) and the impersonal «ein» (one); the point of view and the narrating voice shift between the boy and the horse for the whole passage.

Only the father is inaccessible both to the reader and the son. In contrast with the polyphony of the narration and of the thoughts, all three keep silent while dreaming of a way out.

When the horse hurts its leg, the boy is asked to disinfect the wound with his urine: a transmission of ancient knowledge, a remedy that comes from centuries of cohabitation of man and horse. But the boy cannot do it and in rejecting this transmission opens a deep rift with which he breaks with the farming tradition of his land, the history of his family, his paternal line, and his duty, as firstborn, of inheriting land and farm. The boy dreams and dares to follow his way out, but a sense of shame mixed with a sense of victory struggles within him, a sense of guilt and a sense of fatality: the boy, in fact, is also the adult author who remembers, looks backwards and knows that it was his destiny to break with tradition and become a writer (cf. Gusdorf 1980), although that deep rift, that wound, still hurts:

<p>Det store barnet ber svien. Skal minnast denne hendinga til livs ende. [...] Det store barnet ber svien, uformeleg, men med noko i seg som vil setje seg fast for godt. (T. Vesaas 1997a: 24)</p>	<p>The big boy bears the hurt. He will remember this to the end of his life. [...] The big boy bears the hurt, a shapeless burden, but one that will settle for good. (Trans. by Rokkan; T. Vesaas 2003: 29)</p>
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The ‘shapelessness’ of the hurt finds its poetical shape at last, chaotic like a time of simultaneity, where the Self can be the hurt boy, the writing adult and the absolving witness all at once. In *Det store spelet*, Vesaas explores the possibility of embracing and receiving the paternal legacy

through the conciliatory choice made by Per, the main character; in the poem *Hesten* the writer is faced with the troublesome questions deriving at the same time from his father, his own conscience and the face of a horse behind the studio window: what are you doing? What is your job? What does a poet do? (cf. T. Vesaas 2007: 41; trans. by Greenwald). In this late prose passage, instead, Vesaas tells us about his own choice and the pain of that choice. He describes them «slik det står i minne», as they are in memory. The reader confronts an autobiographical truth and a truth of the memory, which expresses itself in the form of fragmentation, the polyphonic and undefined ways of recollection, a truth that is transfigured by the masks of the self and the mask of time. As regards autobiographical truth in *Det store spelet*, Tarjei Vesaas expresses himself in this way, declaring his faith in the truth of literature:

No er det urett å stemple Det store spelet som direkte skildring av min eigen barndom. Personane stemmer ikkje, heller ikkje hendingane, heller ikkje utgangen for Per – men likevel er det sant. Det er sannare enn den klinkande sanninga i eit noggrant referat ville vera. (O. Vesaas 1985: 78)

It is not correct to label *The Great Cycle* as a direct representation of my childhood. The characters do not fit, the facts do not fit, and the final decision of Per does not fit – nonetheless it is true. It is truer than the bare truth of facts in a detailed report could ever be.

6. Conclusions

Autobiography is the art of curing a *real* wound with words, traveling the path of memory and reconstructing a plot which is deeply *true* and *fictional* at the same time. Although Vesaas, for both personal and aesthetic reasons, keeps himself at a distance from autobiography in the formal sense and creates a plot where nameless characters and figures act, he is nonetheless able to establish a close and intimate relationship with the reader, a relationship that goes beyond Lejeune's «autobiographical pact». The reading of *Båten om kvelden* is a journey through the most sensitive moments in the poet's story. The closeness between the poet and the reader is mainly built on two levels: the plurality of paratextual and intertextual elements, especially *Minne frå eit samliv* and *Tarjei Vesaas om seg sjølv*, in which we can enter into contact with an 'unintentional' voice of the author, and the masked self-representation, the revelation of Tarjei Vesaas behind the masks of his anonymous characters (animals and landscapes included), which flow all together into *Båten om kvelden* like threads of a life-long plot. What finally appears evident is that an autobiographical truth does not need any statement, but rather the collaboration between an authentic polyphony and one or more fictional frames where all the voices of the self are gathered.

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