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## Composition Studies as a Creative Art: Teaching, Writing, Scholarship, Administration

Lynn Z. Bloom

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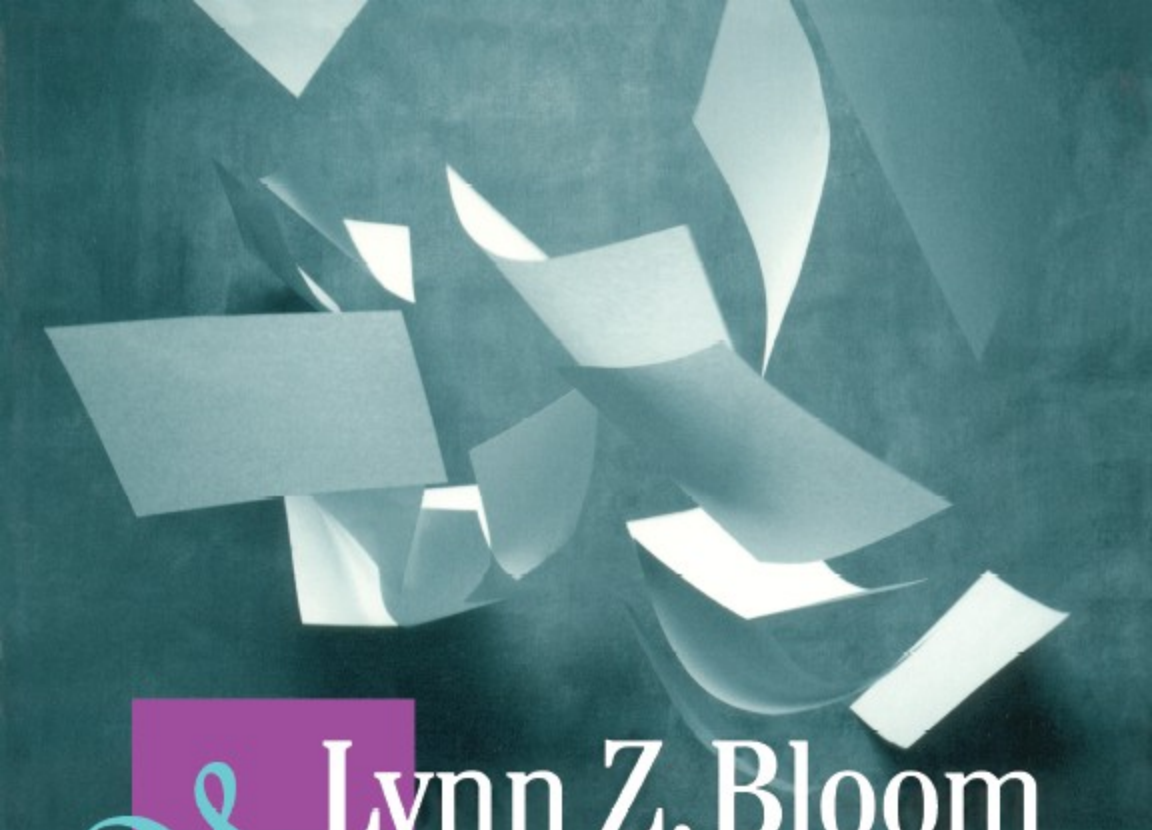
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Lynn Z. Bloom

COMPOSITION  
STUDIES AS A  
CREATIVE ART

TEACHING  
WRITING  
SCHOLARSHIP  
ADMINISTRATION

*Composition Studies as a Creative Art*



*Composition Studies  
as a Creative Art*

Teaching, Writing,  
Scholarship, Administration

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LYNN Z. BLOOM

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
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1998

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CIP

For Martin Bloom

With my writing every word of the way—  
in the beginning,  
between the lines,  
beyond the ending . . .





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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHEN I'M WRITING, THE BOOKS AND JOURNALS MIGRATE FROM THE shelves and cupboards that line my sunny study and end up in heaps on the floor, around the desk, under the worktable—on which still more are stacked—and in the storage closet and the furnace room that catch the overflow. Although the result is a decorator's disaster, I know exactly where everything is—all around me like an embrace, exactly where I need it. If the authors of these works were here in person the room would look like a CCCC convention, enlivened by a swirl of teachers and writers great and good, philosophers, psychologists, rhetoricians, travelers, social commentators, anthropologists, and more, and student writers, generations past and passing. I would greet them with the hugs of welcome, and of thanks, that I extend figuratively not only from this page, but on every page of *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*. What a conversation we could continue, what a celebration.

Space limitations on the printed page, although not in my imagination, confine my acknowledgments by name to those whose involvement with the work here, new and reprinted, has been most immediate. The editors of the journals and books in which many of these writings were originally published offered advice so good (such as "Stick to the point!") that I took most of it. Among those editors who reinforce my understanding that Composition Studies is not only a creative but a collaborative art are: Katherine Adams, John Adams, Bill Bernhardt, Wendy Bishop, Suzanne Bunkers, Ed Corbett, Sid Dobrin, Linda Flower, Sheryl Fontaine, Diane Freedman, Olivia Frey, Toby Fulwiler, Barbara Gebhardt, Rick Gebhardt, Kristine Hansen, Joe Harris, Doug Hesse, Cynthia Huff, Chris Hult, Susan Hunter, Joe Janangelo, Peter Miller, Gary Olson, Hans Ostrom, Jim Raymond, Mike Rose, Mimi Schwartz, Louise Z. Smith, Todd Taylor, Joe Trimmer, and Art Young, as well as a host of unidentified journal and press reviewers. My ongoing professional dialogue with, among others, John

Brereton, Don Daiker, Peter Elbow, Rebecca Faery, Beth Flynn, Anne Gere, Lee Jacobus, Carol Peterson, Linda Peterson, Nancy Sommers, Kurt Spellmeyer, Ed White, and Rosemary Winslow—has also proven a significant formative influence for the writing in this book.

The University of Connecticut, the Aetna Foundation, and the University of Connecticut Research Foundation have provided the research support—time to read, think, and write—that led to *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*. Colleagues John Gatta, Donna Hollenberg, Lee Jacobus, and Veronica Makowsky asked tough questions and expected answers to match. My graduate research assistants have proven to be uniformly resourceful and imaginative in finding and using research materials, and incisive critical readers who have willingly vetted every draft of every paper: Sarah Aguiar (now of Murray State University), Valerie Smith Matteson, Tom Moore (now of the Maine Maritime Academy), Bob Myhal, Kathy Tardif (now of Platinum Technology, Inc.), and Ning Yu (now of Western Washington University). Valerie Smith Matteson and Jenny Spinner my current research assistants, Lori Corsini-Nelson, Aetna secretary, and Michael Spooner, Director of the Utah State University Press, deserve particular thanks for their perseverance and meticulous care in bringing the manuscript of this book as close to perfection as possible (the errors are mine, alas) on extremely short notice—with generosity, goodwill, and amazing grace.

Others, too, emerging from the recesses of real life to be reinvented in creative nonfiction—the quick and the dead, the intimate and the anonymous, the adversaries and the advocates alike—deserve recognition here for their dramatic contributions, sometimes to the text, sometimes to the subtext of this book. I am grateful beyond measure that the drama provided by my immediate family—my husband, Martin, our sons Bard and Laird, their wives Vicki and Sara, and our grandchildren Paul and Elizabeth—has been essentially comic (despite the scary parts recounted in this book), full of the excitement, enthusiasm and energy that make living, like composition studies, a creative art. Martin Bloom, social psychologist and professor, has read every word of every major draft of every chapter with uncommonly good critical sense, and a parodist's intolerance of jargon ("I never noun"). He has provided a retentive memory for titles and key words that I've called out from an adjacent lane during our early morning lap swims, homemade apple pie at bedtime, and all the comforts in between. Best of all, he has trusted me to tell the stories I tell here. Every day, every word, is a gift.

University of Connecticut  
January 1998

## DEFINITION OF POETRY

Once  
I took a course in aesthetics:  
Three hours credit  
If I could learn  
What a poem was.

A poem was “the record of the best and happiest moments of the best and  
happiest minds”;  
“The best words in the best order”;  
“A criticism of life.”  
But what was “best”?  
Would “happiness” necessarily dwell in a criticism?  
And if a poem “tells us . . . something that cannot be said,” how could we discuss  
the ineffable?

A poem was a poem, we learned, if it made you feel as if the top of your head were  
taken off,  
Or if your spine tingled  
Or your gut quivered,  
Save the classics, and with them, the more cathartic, the better.

A poem was metered, rhythmic, regular—  
Except free verse.  
A poem rhymed—  
But not blank verse.  
A poem had consonance, assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia—  
Or none of these.

A poem used a “higher concentration of imagery” than prose.  
“But how high is high?” asked we bourgeois gentlemen, speakers of prose all our lives.  
A poem was “poem-shaped,”  
Yes, just as a human being was man-shaped, unless she was a woman.

Finally, we were told, “a poem should not mean, but be.”  
Be what?

To answer the question for myself  
I wrote a term paper,  
“A Definition of Poetry.”  
The instructor gave it an A.

But I never wrote  
A poem.



## *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*

### SOME WRITERS' BEGINNINGS: THE STUDENTS IN THIS BOOK

**T**his semester my undergraduate writing class meets in a slightly dilapidated 150-year-old farmhouse, a Designated Historic Site, across the road from the central campus's swath of lush lawns and venerable oaks. Out of the line of devastation from the bulldozers, cranes, and other heavy machinery employed in (re)building the university from the underground up, we are on the flight path of the Canada geese and the blue heron that dwell on the campus pond visible from the front porch. At our first meeting, I suggest that we sit around the large seminar table upstairs, but the students choose the couches that line the elongated living room, Matt and Moya, Chris and Christy, Emily and Jamie and Sean and others we'll meet in a minute. That's where we hang out on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, drinking tea and talking about writing.

We have a syllabus that lays out a lot of writing during the semester—about people, places, performance, science, controversy, humor—even more rewriting, and related readings. And we adhere to the schedule; we have to, to make sure the writing keeps coming and coming and coming some more. Yet I never know exactly what's going to happen during any class, and I suspect the students don't either. Those who can't tolerate being slightly off balance jumped ship in the first week. And the rest, like their teacher, seem to value the elements of surprise, the need to accommodate to the dynamics of a class engaged in finding their own route, their own way to becoming writers, on subjects and in styles that matter to them and to their readers—not just other members of this class, but a larger community. Jasmine's letter to the campus paper, a reasoned critique of all the

construction on campus, has just been published. It is the fourth week of the semester. Her example sets the pace.

Today, for instance, begins with Amrita reading an early draft of her paper on a plane, about her return “home” to India for a visit with her “huge family” nine years after her parents had emigrated to New York when she was seven. At debarkation, amidst the heat, the odors, and the crowds, she encountered the passport inspector, “looking at me as if I came from a different planet, commented on my incredibly long nails. . . . He asked me my age, and I replied with a big smile, ‘I am sixteen.’ He said to me, ‘Why does such a young girl like you have such horrible long nails? You should be involved in your education more than in your appearance.’” Although the family dwelling needed “some new tiles,” “a new paint job,” and Amrita was sitting on “the ugliest printed couch I have ever seen” (a lime-and-orange paisley clone, she said, of one in our classroom), the welcome never stopped throughout the long, lazy summer, punctuated by forays to the fruit and vegetable market, and evening rides by rickshaw (“a bike attached to a carriage”) to the ice cream parlor, along teeming streets where orderly traffic “is a joke,” without “lanes or turn signals.”

Amrita finishes reading, visibly nervous but pleased at the impact of her paper on the class. After a round of congratulatory observations (“At your run-in with the customs official, the paper took off”), the dialogue begins, with Mohammed and the paper he wrote about his visit to “the gang of cousins, uncles, and aunts” who always met him at the Karachi airport serving as a satiric counterpoint to Amrita’s return to Delhi: “If deaths due to political terrorism were down to one or two persons a day, things were looking *good*. If blackouts, also known as ‘load shedding,’ were down to one or two nights a week, things were looking *good*. If tap water wasn’t as cloudy as it usually is, things were looking *good*.” Then the questions begin, about bureaucrats, family size and ambience, delivery and interruption of electricity, women’s status, sanitation and disease, inoculations, density of population—and of traffic. Amrita answers, Mohammed corroborates that what she says about India applies to Pakistan as well. “Are there any animals on the streets?” someone asks. “It’s a farm out there!” Amrita explodes. “Imagine being followed by an elephant!” When the laughter subsides, she adds, “and walking where all of them have”—she pauses—“walked.”

What Amrita has presented as a paper with considerable closure has opened up not black holes but a universe of possibilities. “I could write a book,” she exclaims. “I want to deal with being part of two cultures and not losing one while I’m living in the other. And being able to move back and



forth between them. I want to explain my understanding to myself—and to people who haven't been there." As class ends, she leaves in an exhilaration of opportunity. In the next class, after I read this section of the introduction aloud ("Did I get it right?" "Yes," said the students, "yes"), Amrita volunteered—amidst a chorus of suggestions of what else to put in the paper ("pedestrians and shopkeepers" "street scenes," "animals")—"I'm willing to rewrite this paper as many times as necessary to get across the spirit of my country and my people." Exactly.

The backbone of another colleague's course with the same title is Aristotelean argumentation. A different colleague focuses on Pagemaker software and desktop publishing; the major project is to write a heavily documented scientific research paper. Across campus, engineering students are writing technical presentations for prospective clients, agriculture students are assessing the consequences of genetic engineering on food production; history students are writing original interpretations of primary documents. There is no single way to teach students to write, and no exclusively right way. You have been introduced to my way. *Composition Studies as a Creative Art* provides the broader context, of theory, philosophy, pedagogy, and scholarship, from which this teaching emanates.

#### WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT COMPOSITION STUDIES: THE PHILOSOPHY OF THIS BOOK

Through this book in other voices, other rooms, resonate the voices of other students in my classes, from freshman through doctoral students, reinforced by participants in community workshops. They do not always agree, but as they talk to one another they also speak to me. In turn, I incorporate these colloquies in conversation with colleagues, nationally and internationally, via telephone and e-mail, at conferences, in print. These dialogues form the running commentary in my head as I write *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*.

Talking about composition studies is like talking about love; everybody knows what they mean by the term, few can define it to anyone else's satisfaction, everyone has their own way of doing it. At heart, this is a book about the the creative dynamics that arise from the interrelation of writing, teaching writing—and ways of reading, and the scholarship and administrative issues engendered by both. This book is fueled by a mixture of faith in the field and the combination of fields, hope that our efforts can make a difference, and a sense of community in its broadest meaning. For those of us willing to devote our lives to these subjects, composition studies, like love itself, is therefore by necessity a creative art.

Our work, as writers, teachers, scholars, administrators cannot be other than creative. That we work in a complicated, ever-changing world fraught with complex concerns of—among other matters—gender, race and ethnicity, class, economics, and politics is reflected as a major motif in many of the chapters in this book. Because our world is not static, our involvement in it is, ideally, an active, ongoing process, rather than a reactive accommodation to the status quo. The institutions in which we work—colleges, universities, school systems—have a stake in keeping things as they are: “You can’t do that! It’s: impossible/never been done before/out of order/none of your business.” But these same systems have an even more important stake in accommodating creative change, and allowing teachers, scholars, administrators to invent new and potentially useful ways of re-inventing, reinterpreting that same universe. So my reaction to “You can’t do that!” has become to take steps, at first timid, then bolder, and now even more risky, to demonstrate “Oh yes I can.” In the process of questioning authority, we assume authority.

Scientists and inventors whose work depends on creativity address this quest with succinct eloquence. Wilson Greatbach, inventor of the implantable pacemaker and thousands of other medical marvels, explains to an interviewer, “The most important factor [in invention] . . . is whether or not you could look at something and wonder, What makes it work? Could I make it better? Inventing takes curiosity; it takes drive; it takes an inability to be discouraged. An inventor is a person who really doesn’t get interested in a problem until it looks impossible” (in K. Brown 29). Albert Einstein reiterates, “The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.” We live the questions while we seek the answers.

#### WHY I WRITE AND WHAT I WRITE FOR: THE CONTENTS OF THIS BOOK

The essence of regarding composition studies as a creative art is to engage in a process of intellectual or aesthetic free play, and to translate the results of this play into serious work that retains the freedom and play of its origins. *Composition Studies as a Creative Art* reveals various ways in which I’ve tried to do this in recent years. This book is a collection of my own composition studies written or published since 1990, with the exception of chapter twelve, “Anxious Writers in Context” (1985), an example of writing process research—a particular concern of the 1980s.

Part I is devoted to *Teaching Writing and Teaching Writing Teachers*. Indeed, the entire book is essentially about teaching writing. The pedagogical implications of the Epigraph, “Definition of Poetry” are manifested in chapter one, “Finding a Family, Finding a Voice,” chapter four, “Textual Terror, Textual Power,” and chapter five, “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre.” The thrust of all four is that to understand what writing entails, as both process and product, students should try writing for themselves literature of the sort they’re studying. Teachers have no choice but to set the pace; they too must write early and write often in one or more of the genres they’re teaching. To be credible colleagues in the writing communities such classes create, how can teachers do otherwise? Students themselves comment on how such teaching works, and why it works so well, as co-authors of the dialogue about teaching and writing that constitutes chapter five. The creative stance that I advocate should not seem a radical position, but to many it remains so, and is the cause of “textual terror.” To try such writing oneself, and thereby to gain the authority of “textual power” is to remove much of the threat, for teachers and students alike.

It is not necessary to rehearse here the argument that such writing is not utilitarian and therefore has no place in a college curriculum; Behar, DiPardo, Elbow and Scholes, among others, have addressed that issue in works cited throughout this book. Nor is it necessary to defend here the life, rather than the death, of the author. Although literary theorists (read deconstructionists) and now some composition studies scholars (you know who you are) proclaim the demise of authorship (always, of course, through authored works of their own), authors themselves remain impervious to such critical assaults and continue to write apace—and to be read widely. The writing throughout this book, student and professional alike, speaks eloquently in its own defense.

The two chapters on “Teaching My Class” (chapter two) and “Freshman Composition as a Middle Class Enterprise” (chapter three) identify the not-so-hidden class agendas that pervade college catalogs and curricula (chapter two) and freshman composition textbooks (chapter three). In these I am not arguing that to reinforce middle class values and world view is necessarily the *ideal* of American education, but demonstrating that such is indeed the norm. American society expects its citizens to speak and write in standard English, the *lingua franca* of the country, and to become part of a social structure inside and outside the university that manifests the national virtues, among them clarity, precision, order, and efficiency. That freshman composition is saturated with these values, for the virtues are values, is as inevitable as it is unavoidable.

Part II focuses on *Teaching and Writing Creative Nonfiction*, my particular orientation to the protean and intersecting realms of composition and literature, as explained in chapters seven, eight, and nine. Chapter nine “Why Don’t We Write What We Teach? And Publish It?” calls for major changes in the writing and style of professional publication that are analogous to the student writing I characterize in chapter seven, “Creative Nonfiction, Is There Any Other Kind?” The fact that no writing exists without a context—or a myriad of the contexts encompassed by the term *political*—is examined in chapter five, “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre,” with particular application to the teaching of autobiographical writings in freshman composition and in undergraduate literature courses. Chapter five also illustrates that the ideas discussed in chapters seven and nine in relation to advanced composition are applicable as well to the writing of essays in freshman composition and in a variety of other contexts, in and out of school.

Two other creative nonfiction essays in this section, chapters six and ten, practice what I preach in the other chapters, as do the narrative fragments of chapter eight. I wish that my experiences of “Teaching College English as a Woman” (chapter six), as an adjunct and as a writing director, were now of historical significance only, as some of the academy’s more blatantly sexist practices have become. Yet judging from statistics on the increasing number of part-timers nationwide, from the anguished correspondence provoked by articles on the subject, and from people I meet everyday teaching as adjuncts at two, three, even four colleges concurrently, the subject is alive and festering. Whereas chapter one, “Finding a Family, Finding a Voice,” reflects the dominant, positive masterplot and one of the best classes I’ve ever taught, chapter ten, “Subverting the Academic Masterplot,” reveals my worst class, enacting a plot so thoroughly negative from start to finish that there is no redemption, except possibly the Lessons About Teaching one can learn from these mistakes.

Part III treats some of the many aspects of *Creative Scholarship and Publication in Composition Studies*. Chapter eleven, “Coming of Age in the Field That Had No Name,” offers a composition studies analysis of my doctoral dissertation on *How Literary Biographers Use Their Subjects’ Works*—an attempt to determine two sets of composing processes, those of notable literary biographers and those of the creative writers who were their subjects. Written before composition studies had a label and a language, the dissertation nevertheless exemplifies many of the concerns and methods of the field as it has continued to emerge in the past quarter-century. Thus this chapter offers a microcosmic study of one researcher’s methodology in

an emerging field. It also presents a way to re-examine a great deal of other work in composition studies done before the language emerged in which to talk about it.

Chapters eleven, “Coming of Age in the Field That Had No Name,” and thirteen, “‘I Write for Myself and Strangers’: Private Diaries as Public Documents,” are included to promote an understanding of how the texts they discuss are written, reinforcing the commentary in chapters seven and nine. Chapter twelve addresses significant differences between amateur and professional writers. Professionals continually make choices that don’t occur to most amateur writers—about how much information and contextualization to provide, how to convey a particular authorial persona, what tone and vocabulary to use—in short, how to accommodate an external audience. My analysis is intended to demonstrate how teachers can enhance students’ understanding of the primary texts, improve their aesthetic sensibility, and create a climate for them to write comparable works. I have deliberately chosen to include in *Composition Studies as a Creative Art* this chapter, originally published in Bunkers and Huff’s *Critical Essays on Women’s Diaries*; chapter five, “American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre,” which recently appeared in Bishop and Ostrom’s *Genre and Writing: Issues, Arguments, Alternatives*, and chapter eleven, “Coming of Age,” originally written for Frey and Freedman’s book on *The Autobiographical Nature of Research, Scholarship, and Knowledge Across the Disciplines*, to emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of my own work, as of composition studies in general. With the world as our subject, we should be able to publish anywhere in the universe of discourse.

Chapter twelve “Anxious Writers in Context,” presents writing anxiety theory, applicable to the composing processes of all student writers and many writers outside the academy, anxious or not. I apply the theory to case studies of two anxious writers to show how a combination of contextual factors enabled one to finish her work and conspired against the work of the other. Chapter fourteen, “Making Essay Connections: Editing Readers for First-Year Writers,” analyzes issues involved in editing freshman composition Readers (“Don’t do it!” I conclude); and chapter fifteen, “The Importance of External Reviews in Composition Studies,” discusses the criteria, scope, and significance of external reviews of individual scholarship (for promotion, tenure) and of entire programs in composition studies.

Part IV, the concluding section, addresses ways to emphasize *Writing Program Administration as a Creative Enterprise*, and thereby to do it better and to make it fun, if not actually lovable. Every chapter attests to this.

In chapter seventeen, “Why I (Used to) Hate to Give Grades,” I discuss a creative solution to the unavoidable necessity of having to give grades. Chapter eighteen, “Initiation Rites, Initiation Rights,” and chapter nineteen, “Writing Program Administration as a Creative Process,” address creative ways to serve as a writing program administrator. Chapter eighteen deals with ways to transform the initiation rites—institutional hazing calculated to depress, if not destroy, newcomers to administrative jobs—into constructive opportunities for changing—curricula, the institutional climate concerning writing, and with perseverance, even the culture. Chapter nineteen, “Making a Difference,” focuses on how WPAs can train teachers, influence graduate and undergraduate education, and enhance the employing institution’s reputation in composition studies. It is not by chance that the book’s two satiric pieces, chapter sixteen, “I Want a Writing Director” and chapter twenty, “Bloom’s Laws” (“WPAs don’t think something is fun unless it requires three hundred . . . hours of community service”) appear in the section on administration, for satire implies the possibility of reforming the current state in the direction of an ideal. Indeed, if I appear to be an idealist throughout this book, that is not by chance. If we as teachers, scholars, administrators do not believe that our work can make things better, then we are grounded in pessimism rather than hope, and we should either change our minds or our line of work.

#### BLURRED GENRES: THE STYLE OF THIS BOOK

It took an existential crisis—one that led to a life-altering decision—that let me begin, a decade ago, to write this book.

For twenty years prior to that time, as an academic scholar, my writing had reflected the conventions of academic prose that William H. Gass satirizes in “Emerson and the Essay”: “An article . . . must appear complete and straightforward and footnoted and useful and certain and is very likely a veritable Michelin of misdirection; for the article pretends that everything is clear, that its argument is unassailable, that there are no soggy patches, no illicit inferences, no illegitimate connections; it furnishes seals of approval and underwriters’ guarantees” (25). I wrote and published many such articles, invariably twenty double-spaced typescript pages, a-bristle with footnotes. I took pains to delete myself, even my passion for the subject at hand, from my work; to appear as a character in one’s own writing would be unseemly, I thought. Yet in my heart I knew that my work, like my life—or anyone’s, for that matter—was beset by doubts, fallibility, and the random chance and error that can undermine the best of intentions as

well as of research. Whether anyone else was as vulnerable as I was impossible to tell, for no one could admit such human frailty in academic journals, those bastions of certainty and shrill argument, as Olivia Frey argues in “Beyond Literary Darwinism.” To get published, authors had to play hardball according to guys’ rules which, as Gesa Kirsch anatomizes in *Women Writing (in) the Academy*, are still operative in what for many remains the only game in town.

I grew dissatisfied with this game. Like all rule-bound enterprises, the artificial certainty of the argument and the effacement of the author dehumanized a messy process and made it too tidy. I wanted to acknowledge in print that I was subject to the full range of the difficulties, as well as the delights, of the human condition. I wanted to write about my work—teaching, writing, scholarship, administration—as an identifiable person rather than as a remote Authority. I wanted to write in a personal voice and to set my work in a human context that included past history as well as the issue of current concern. But I couldn’t begin to write as a person invested in my subject as in life itself, rather than as a detached scholar, until I could admit—in public and in writing—that my understanding of some things was tentative, uncertain; that I had a lot to learn and a long way to go; that I could make mistakes, great and small.

As I explain in chapter one, “Finding a Family, Finding a Voice,” the precipitating event was sudden and it was swift. My husband of (then) twenty-nine years, his customary good health in rapid decline, was diagnosed as suffering from a malignant brain tumor. The issue was not whether he would die, but when. In that context, I wrote the first essay in which I dared to use the vertical pronoun; coming out as a human being seemed a small risk in comparison with the life-and-death battle being waged in our household. By the time Martin had—astonishingly—recovered, I had experienced the pleasure, and the power, of speaking in my own voice, and of encouraging my students to do the same, and there was no turning back.

Later, one of my students, such an astute critic of others’ writing that I asked him to read my own manuscript in progress, reinforced my decision to incorporate human stories into academic writing with the sensible and by that time only mildly frightening observation that, “You’re writing a lot about autobiography as a critic,” he said, “but you’d reinforce the point economically if you’d put in some of your own.” Again there has been no turning back, but only a vision of writing to come as I have written the autobiographical segments of my recent work. So I proffer this Introduction to *Composition Studies as a Creative Art* as an *apologia*, not an apology, full of delight at the opportunity to share with colleagues across

the country—teachers, students, administrators—this labor of a lifetime, a labor of love.

Make no mistake. Just because the writing throughout this book sounds personal does not mean that it is therefore by definition sloppy, sentimental, self-indulgent, or stupid—objections too often fired broadside against the living body of such work. In chapter seventeen, “Why I (Used to) Hate to Give Grades,” for example, every concept of assessment, learning theory, and pedagogy could have been buttressed by citations. But the literature is so well-known that I expected readers would be familiar with it, and if not, that their own experience would argue the merits of my case. I must confess that I also wanted to see whether a major journal would take it, unshod by footnotes, and that I chortled when *CCC* said “Yes”!

Nor does personal-sounding writing mean that the work at hand is particularly personal, any more than impersonal-sounding writing means that the author is not invested in the subject, as addressed in chapters four, five, and twelve. Both are ways of constructing texts; one way is not necessarily more honest, straightforward, or intelligent than the other. But both ways, because they are nonfiction, are expected to tell the truth, even if they tell it slant, for that expectation is the basis of the transaction between nonfiction writers and their readers, even allowing for some “stretchers,” as Mark Twain says.

In chapters seven, “Creative Nonfiction—Is There Any Other Kind?,” and nine, “Why Don’t We Write What We Teach?,” I take issue with the arguments of those who would annihilate human-sounding style; there is no need to reiterate the debate in this Introduction. But another seven years of experience in incorporating creative nonfiction into academic articles—the predominant technique in most of the chapters of this book—allows me to address a related matter: how hard it is to write this way. Every piece is an exercise in intellectual and aesthetic rigor, the antithesis of self-indulgence, as I explain in chapters four (“Textual Terror, Textual Power”), seven (“Creative Nonfiction”), and nine (“Why Don’t We . . .?”). In chapter five (“Telling Secrets, Telling Lies, Telling Lives”) the student authors amplify my own understanding of how such rigor is attained, even in a seemingly free-wheeling context.

Because my own writing process embeds E.M. Forster’s perennial question, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?,” I have always rewritten a great deal in the course of coming to understand my subject and determining what I mean to say. Now that I’m combining academic storytelling and academic writing, I rewrite even more. Intellectually and emotionally, the telling of autobiographical stories is one way to make



sense of things that don't make sense. Usually the meaning does not come all at once, but slowly, in bits and pieces. Moreover, unlike most academic critical writing which largely follows the form of a classical argument, every new piece that employs creative nonfiction, the playing of verbal jazz, requires the author to learn to write anew, in the course of resolving technical issues of persona, style, tone, dialogue, scene construction (see chapters four, five, seven, nine, twelve). Because each problem is new, each solution has to be new, invented—in the absence of predictable formula or format, after considerable trial and error. The leveling effect of this process means that I am on the same plane with my students, in every semester, every class—and happy to take off for the unexplored in their company.

For instance, it took fifteen years before I was willing to disinter the buried memories of my worst class ever, followed by two more years to write “Subverting the Academic Masterplot” (chapter ten)—sixteen major drafts, not counting innumerable tinkering with particularly tough spots. A deadline, as Sam Johnson has observed of an impending hanging, wonderfully focuses the mind, and this paper lurched from one deadline to another—chunks, written and dramatically revised and revised again—for presentation at two CCCC meetings. The beginning, “Teachers’ Tales—The Masterplots,” was the easy part, because its substance depended on an analysis of the plots of the success stories of teachers we know and love, Mina Shaughnessy as a case in point, buttressed in my mind (though not in the paper) by the appealing figures of Nancie Atwell, Don Murray, Mike Rose. Then I got stuck, and although I had agreed to contribute the piece to Joe Trimmer’s volume on *Narration as Knowledge*, I kept writing page after page of analysis, punctuated by self-flagellating rhetorical questions, such as “How could I have imagined that conceptualizing a research design, and working out its nuances—which would require the students to have frequent and extended discussions with me—could be conducted in absentia?”

Yes, I wrote that sentence, and a lot more like it. I am fond of quoting to my students the observation of physicist Jerrold Zacharias, “If you can’t put it into English it means you don’t understand it yourself”; this truth came home with a vengeance. With every phrase I continued to sink into the verbal quicksand until straight talk from the friends to whom I sent it in desperation, critical readers among those acknowledged at the outset of this book, let me know that to tell the story I had to write it as a narrative, rather than as an academic treatise. I was still stuck. I hadn’t taken notes on that miserable class, I’d tried to forget it. In order to re-create the critical scenes, I decided to transform all the analysis into dialogue; it took a slow two

months to work up to the most scornful student's pivotal sentence, "You don't know what ethnography is?" Then the rest clicked into place. It's easy to see why Hemingway could say that he rewrote the ending to *Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times—"just getting the words right." And the music.

Half the book is spanking new. Eight chapters were published in 1997–98 (Chapters two, five, eight, ten, fourteen, fifteen, seventeen, nineteen) and two are not yet published elsewhere (chapters eleven and twenty). During the past seven years my own way of writing has changed dramatically, as has my understanding of the fluid field of composition studies and of the world in which we and our students make our hesitant way. This new understanding is reflected in extensively rewritten versions of chapters five and nine. I have suppressed an urge to rewrite other pieces—not because I no longer believe what I said, but for the sheer sake of shaking up the style, to see whether I could make anew what I had already made anew earlier. I have, however, updated the citations when to do so would not alter their use in the text; and I have eliminated some of the redundancies that arise from juxtaposing formerly free-standing articles in a single collection. If it were possible to do so, I would take out all the footnotes, either transforming their essence into text or discarding it. (And I would eliminate parenthetical remarks.) What you are reading in this Introduction has in various incarnations had a dozen footnotes, all deleted. Yet I have reached closure in this Introduction in exactly twenty typescript pages, same as always, a scholarly writer to the end.

P A R T I

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*Teaching Writing  
and  
Teaching Writing Teachers*



## *Finding a Family, Finding a Voice: A Writing Teacher Teaches Writing Teachers*

A PARADIGM SHIFT, SAYS THOMAS KUHN, ARISES IN RESPONSE TO A CRISIS. Old ways don't work, old explanations don't fit, and a crisis makes apparent the need for a new paradigm that fits better. This is the story of how three crises (two new, one of long standing) converged to precipitate a paradigm shift in the way I teach writing teachers to teach writing. In the twinkling of an eye, the class metamorphosed from students in the process of learning about teaching in order to teach writing, to students in the process of becoming writers in order to teach writing. Having effected the change, quite by accident, I can't go back; the new paradigm has supplanted the old.

I had taught "Teaching Composition," a graduate course in composition theory and pedagogy required of all new TAs, on and off for a decade, and I was looking forward to teaching it again at Virginia Commonwealth University. Following a widely accepted paradigm that was familiar, workable, and comfortable, I knew exactly what I would do. My students would read enough central works of rhetorical theory and composition research to enable them to sail, rather than stagger, through their first semester in the classroom. They would chart their course according to the principles and practices of such master mariners as Lindemann, Shaughnessy, Tate and Corbett, and Graves; their own teaching would mirror mine, which would of course model the best available information.

Initially the TAs would write an analysis of their own composing processes, to help them understand the process-oriented composition course they were teaching. They'd analyze a master's style. Later on, they would compile an annotated bibliography of current research and use

these sources in a term paper of their choice. But whether or not these new teachers of writing wrote much or cared much about their own writing except to produce the requisite papers in appropriate academic form was beyond the expectations of myself or indeed of any of our graduate offerings other than writing workshops. Even though I write all the time (a day without writing is a day lost forever), I would not impose the additional burden on my students. They already had enough to do.

In my role as instructor I would provide an exemplary model of a professional writing teacher: always prepared, always able to anticipate their questions and answer them, always cheerfully in control. I could do no less. So I launched into the first day's ritual introduction to the course, but as I enthusiastically outlined what we'd do and why, it became apparent that something was wrong. The students seemed perplexed when I asked what writing assignments they were giving their freshmen. They looked unhappy when I suggested they bring in a sample of the diagnostic freshman essay to discuss in class, and finally, when I asked them to prepare a syllabus for the first two weeks of class they admitted that only two of the fourteen somber students around the conference table were actually teaching. Some were tutoring in the writing center; some were grading papers for professors in literature courses; some had fellowships that freed them from other work; some were just taking the course for fun. Furthermore, the second edition of Lindemann's *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, which I had intended as the core of the course, was delayed by the publisher; it wouldn't be available for a month, maybe longer. By the end of this very very long 90-minute session, I knew I would have to discard my well-wrought, carefully refined semester syllabus and redo the whole course.

In the two days between class sessions (we met twice a week) I began the walk along the tightrope that stretched from experience to innocence. Being by nature a risk-taker (no, I don't ride Harley Davidsons or dive off the 15-meter board), I am always trying new things: jobs, book ideas, and now—the riskiest of all—some creative nonfiction and poetry. (In the process of learning how to do it I am finally finding the welcome, personal voice I have for a lifetime been too scared to use—which balances the discomfort and vulnerability of public exposure.) So I moved headlong toward the innocent, the unknown end. In risk-taking I would do risk-teaching.

Because my students had no students of their own, I decided to ask them to examine their own writing. For a decade I had been asking students in virtually all my classes to write a first paper on "How I Write," as a way of helping themselves and me to better understand their composing

process(es), and to anticipate and correct pitfalls. However, such papers, which I used to find fascinating, were becoming predictable to all of us; “How I Write” was the equivalent of “What I Did on My Summer Vacation” to these students, who had come of age in a process-oriented curriculum. Then, after all these years, I finally recognized the obvious—what good was a process without a compelling motive to use it? “Why I Write” had to precede “How I Write.” I knew that it would be far more difficult to write such a paper than “How I Write,” but there was no alternative.

I began the next class, my once-elegant and comprehensive syllabus, embodying the old paradigm, now reduced to a few tentative key words, by announcing the first writing assignment, “Why I Write.” “Here I am,” I said, “trying to model for you the Right Way to Give a Writing Assignment, and I’m doing it all wrong. I usually like to talk an assignment through with my students, focusing on useful key words” (major ideas, primary traits) “and appropriate rhetorical strategies, anticipating the problems, and offering suggestions for How to Do It. We look at some sample papers to see what other students have done.

“But I can’t do these things with this assignment. I’ve never given it before.” How could I, in thirty years of teaching, have overlooked the obvious? “So I don’t know what to expect. I don’t know why you write, but I do know that if writing is important to you, your paper will be very revealing and it will be very hard to do. It’s not fair,” I continued, “to ask students who don’t know the teacher and whom the teacher doesn’t know to expose themselves on a personal level before the class has had time to create a community of trust and understanding, and yet I’m asking you to do this.” So much for the exemplary model. “We can read why George Orwell or Joan Didion and Elie Wiesel say they write” (I distributed copies of their essays for the next session), “and we can see what the writers in *In Praise of What Persists* and *The Paris Review* series say, and we will—but maybe their reasons aren’t your reasons. I tell you what”—I hesitated before taking the plunge because I knew the water would be cold and that I would be vulnerable, even, to drowning—“I’ll go first, and we’ll see what we can learn from my experience.”

I had always been reluctant to impose my writing on my students. The focus of our classes should be properly on their work, not mine. I suspected I could write better than they could, and I didn’t want to establish a climate of competition. But this class contained a published poet and a prizewinning novelist, so the students could set the competence level for their peers. Yet I could think of no other way to establish a climate for teaching writing as a process than by examining the question fundamental

to that process—not “Why do it?” but “Why do I want to do it?”—and now I believe there is no other way.

“Teaching Composition” was getting tougher, unpredictable and therefore potentially out of control, though the students seemed very willing to explore “Why I Write,” especially since I’d volunteered to test the waters. Our class, myself included, had also agreed to keep notebooks of reactions not only to the assigned and eclectic readings, but to what went on in class; we’d see what we could learn from the writing in progress and the teaching in process.

The character of the course—an unstructured, off-balance, ad lib response to a crisis, like street theater in comparison with a scripted play on a proscenium arch stage—was becoming a metaphor for my personal life. My husband, also a professor and writer, and always cheerfully healthy, had begun waking up with headaches. After he woke up earlier and earlier and sometimes did not sleep at all, he consulted our usually cheerful dentist who said, “Nope, it’s not a toothache,” and sent him off to our usually cheerful internist, who suspected sinus problems and prescribed ten days of decongestant. But the headaches got worse, and the internist, no longer cheerful, sent my husband, who was having difficulty reading by this time, to the local ENT specialist. Ordinarily a dramatic joker who treated even accident victims with puns and funny faces, this doctor said, impassively, “I can see something in there, but I can’t tell what it is,” and sent him to a specialist at the state’s major medical center, the Medical College of Virginia. By this time I was driving my husband everywhere he needed to go, for he could not see well enough to drive, though with blind faith he continued to teach.

In class I felt like an Easter candy, with an eggshell veneer over a liquid center; poke it and I’d collapse, the interior running out. I was terrified that I would become a widow. At home, I masked my tension in Girl Scout good cheer and after one long sleepless night I couldn’t cry any more and forced myself to eat and to swim and to go to bed and even to play hostess to a succession of houseguests, some from overseas, invited months before. “We don’t have anywhere else to go,” they announced from Dulles Airport, “you have to take us in.” And so we did.

In this context I wrote “Why I Write.” For the first time in my literary life I could be uninhibited; graduate school training had made me such a self-effacing writer that I’d never before written anything except poetry in the first person. In relation to the mortal combat being waged in our household, everything else became a trivial pursuit. I was finally free to say what I wanted; our existential crisis was, at least, liberating.



Only I wasn't free. At least, not on the first draft, or the second, or the third. The first time through I wrote the easy part: "I write because I can't not write. From the moment I learned to read, enamored of the joys of Dr. Seuss, I knew I wanted to write. I thought at the age of six that to delight readers with words was the most wonderful thing in the world. I still think so." Only later did I have the courage to add, "To write is to touch one's readers, to make friends and risk enemies, to become a member of the human family—to belong, even in exile."

That first version was a piece of cake, six pages in two hours—a lot faster than I usually write, even with the computer. Maybe what I was asking my students to do wasn't so hard after all, though as I commented at the time in my teacher's/writer's notebook, "The metamorphosis from child reader to adult writer dashing off book after article after book makes the act of writing seem pretty simple, and pretty simple-minded, and unbelievable."

Indeed, the reasons for writing that we were discussing in class didn't make it sound that easy. George Orwell's "Why I Write" is a political manifesto: "My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. . . . I write because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention . . ." (318). Orwell's motive resonates in Joan Didion's claim, in another "Why I Write," that all serious writers say "*listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*" (17). The message of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel is unfailingly moral; in "Why I Write: Making No Become Yes," he explains that he writes as a witness to the memory of the Holocaust victims:

"I owe them my roots and my memory. I am duty-bound to serve as their emissary, transmitting the history of their disappearance, even if it disturbs, even if it brings pain. Not to do so would be to betray them, and thus myself. . . . Why do I write? To wrench those victims from oblivion. To help the dead vanquish death" (54–57).

The day before my paper was due I started at 9 a.m. to polish it—an hour's task, I anticipated. By 4 p.m. I needed a break; at 9 p.m. I was still writing, I finally finished, drained, at 1 a.m. The resulting nine-page version wasn't much longer than the original draft, but the substance had changed considerably as I imposed a grid of the hard stuff over the original text. Why I write—as Orwell and Didion and Wiesel know full well—is who I am, and when I had plumbed "the deep heart's core" I knew I had said enough.

In elementary school, I told my students, I wrote to distance myself from conventional classmates—I wrote satires (about them) while they wrote yet again about their summer vacations; writing was social criticism.

In high school I wrote to find a voice, to distance myself from my overbearing “*paterfamilias* of four good German names (and a nickname of ‘Odd’),” who sought to impose his pompous, professorial style on my writing as on my life; writing was rebellion. In college I wrote to learn what I had to say; in graduate school and afterward I wrote to understand what others (writers, especially) had to say and how they said it. Writing was profession. So I wrote my way into job after job, too often filling others’ demands for reports, reviews, encyclopedia articles, critical essays, textbooks, chapters of other people’s books. In writing so much as somebody’s professor, somebody’s colleague, somebody’s friend, I was losing my voice.

I was also writing, however, in hopes that my parents would be once again proud and “would invite me, the published author, back into the family they had thrown me out of, stunned, at 24 when I married out of their non-religion, a Jew.” But “my father carefully misread my major books, the ones the reviewers especially liked, and ignored the rest. He never praised one syllable.” I said all this in the essay for my students; I told them what I had never told anyone in public before, more even than my sister and brother knew. How could I make myself so vulnerable to the very students, whom I still didn’t know very well, whose authority figure I was supposed to be? How could I live with them for the rest of the semester? But—I took a deep breath—how could I not write “Why I Write” without being as candid with them and tough with myself as I expected them to be in their own writing?

So I concluded the essay: My husband, “best critic and best friend,” and the job security and independence that have come from doctoring and mastering academic writing have enabled me to regain my voice. I love being back where I started, with writing that is risky, daring, subversive, the writing “that most engages my heart and soul, the writing that is about families, parents and children,” in biography, oral history, autobiography, poetry. I explained, “My father is dead now, and whether he ever loved me or my writing enough is beyond change. . . . In writing about families, in creating and re-creating them, I rejoin the family of my own choosing. I am part of them. They cannot throw me out; I take them in. I write to remain a member of the human race, the family that encompasses us all.”

The morning after I finished “Why I Write” my husband and I saw films of the CAT scan. We could not talk about the clenched-fist white spot under his right eye, bigger than a golf ball, pressing against his brain. Indeed, we said very little on that very long drive to school that morning, for the diagnosis was a malignant brain tumor. “I’m prepared to die,” he told me matter-of-factly. “I want you to know I have no regrets about our

marriage, all 29 years. None.” Just as matter-of-factly I replied, gripping the wheel so I wouldn’t crack us up, “Well, I’m not prepared for you to die, and I want you to fight this.” And so I went to class, with “zero at the bone” burning in my brain, to read the essay that I decided to give my husband for his impending birthday. We make our own presents, future or no.

My voice began trembling and my hands started shaking long before we got to “Why I Write,” which I saved for the very end. The good reason for this was, of course, the pedagogical decision not to take up too much class time with my own work. I cannot remember what we said, that day, about Corbett and Aristotle on invention. I think we talked, that day, about Eudora Welty’s concept of “confluence” in *One Writer’s Beginnings*, and Tess Gallagher’s “My Father’s Love Letters” and the *Paris Review* interview with Thurber: “I’m always writing. I write even at parties. Sometime my wife looks over at me and says, ‘Dammit Thurber, stop writing’” (96).

Finally I took a deep breath and told the class about how I wrote the essay, that it had taken all my life and one week and would take more. I know I did not tell them about the CAT scan. I know also that although I am usually careful to make eye contact with my students, and to vary the pace of my presentation and allow for interruptions and relevant digressions and questions, I clung to the paper and without looking at anyone read the essay straight through in one gulp. There were tears in my eyes as I finished, as indeed there are as I write again about this day of days, and there was silence in that room.

No one said anything, but the time was up anyway. On their way out, however, several of the students said it was a good class, some shook my hand, and one gave me a hug. That had never before happened so early in the semester. It was like leaving church.

For the rest of the term I heard about that class, from the students in person and in their notebooks. In risk-taking, risk-teaching, showing them how much I cared about writing, I had complicated their lives. They had to care too. A writing center tutor wrote, “All over Richmond I run into Lynn Bloom [sic] students moaning about their papers—they all want to put a lot into it; they feel the paper is demanding a lot of them.” An ex bass-player corroborated: “Damn you, Lynn Bloom. Have you let me in for a life of writing, for a life of struggle to create, to express, to move from a state of knowing less to a state of knowing more or less what I want to say?”

Nevertheless, the class was, as one student said, “charged up and full of energy.” The novelist observed: “here I am on a dismal rainy day, with my family life falling apart (and yes that makes me cranky, yes that makes it harder to get something done) *and this class cheers me up and helps me*

believe I am a writer.” Another analyzed her experience as a graduate student in this way: “Although I went through four years of college and possess a bachelor’s degree [in business administration], I am attending college for the first time. . . . I am now in school for the sole purpose of learning and I can’t seem to get enough. . . . For the first time ever I have understood the idea of getting satisfaction from the project itself rather than concentrating on the grade.”

A first-time composition teacher, whose term project was research on “ways to make students care about their writing,” said:

There is an atmosphere where everyone cares about their writing. . . . I have tried to think back over what may have prompted this atmosphere in our class. . . . it was Lynn Bloom’s reading her paper on why she writes. She took so many chances in that paper—invested so much confidence in our class—went out on a limb to make us feel like we were a gathering of writers with whom she wanted to share her work. [Before that] the risk had gone out of my writing. . . . but when I heard her read, and when I heard some of the other students’ papers, I realized that this class was going to take a different turn from my other graduate classes, and that maybe it was going to give me the ability to earn the distinction of calling myself a writer.

There’s not much more to say. Through taking risks, through letting my students see me as a writer-always-in-process who cares deeply about what I write and can admit vulnerability and change, I effected a paradigm shift. Within two months’ time, my class had changed from students in the process of learning about teaching in order to teach writing, to students in the process of becoming writers in order to teach writing. They learned about teaching writing as they wrote and as they read—research essays, finally Lindemann and each other’s writings—while they wrote. As a student writer-in-process said, “I am grateful that the class was structured (de-structured?) to allow us to answer our own questions.” Another exulted, “[This] has turned out to be a writing boot camp for me.” Even the single holdout, the elementary teacher who never wanted to write, succumbed to the new paradigm within a month: “I surrender! I’m just going to let myself be surprised with the directions this class takes. Risky voyages can take you where you never thought of going. Safe voyages are limited. Dr. Bloom has decided on the risky voyage and I admire her courage for picking it. I can be game enough to cast off my mooring ropes (‘But I thought this class was supposed to. . .’) and sail on down the river with her.”

In becoming writers, the class was becoming a community of writers, as well. The depth of their investment in their own writing mirrored a receptivity to the work of their peers: “When [someone] reads a paper aloud,

intelligent and instructive discussion follows. When a teaching problem is presented. . . we solve it as a class and we learn.” Thus the students’ engagement with “Why I Write” and their own emerging commitment to writing (two-thirds of them enrolled, the next semester, in my graduate workshop in Writing Nonfiction, including the formerly resistant teacher), to each other, and to teaching writing enabled me, two weeks later, to tell them that if I had to miss class because of my husband’s impending surgery and its potentially terrifying aftermath, they could teach themselves until I returned. Just as they were already doing.

The operation was swift, the outcome sweet. The surgeon’s grin stretched above his mask when he came to give me the news. He repeated, over and over, what a lucky man my husband was. My own good luck was obvious. The biopsy revealed that the cyst the doctor had just removed was the most benign of possibilities, composed of the same cells that form teeth, and the most rare—so rare that he might encounter only one such case in his career. But although the surgeon has since become a kind friend, he could not know then or even now, how doubly lucky I have been in finding a new voice as a writer, and a new paradigm of teaching writing teachers, themselves a new family, as I have weathered this watershed experience.

#### CODA

After my husband’s good health had remained stable for a year, I finally had enough perspective on the class and on my own still-emerging commitment to the risky realm of belletristic writing to attempt this essay. I had put it off as long as I could, but I had agreed to read it at a professional meeting—my first public appearance in my private voice in fifty years—and the deadline was fast approaching. From the safe distance of time and a move to Connecticut I began to wonder whether I was romanticizing the experience, investing it with as much of an impact on the students as it had on me. There was only one way to find out.

I sent the sixth draft to the students, and on a rainy March afternoon went to Virginia to find out. “Did I get it right?” They knew I was as vulnerable to them then as I had been the year before, and as we huddled together in a small room in the writing center it was clear that they had remained a community of writers and teachers and that they regarded me as part of that community. “Yes,” they said, it reflected both the letter and the spirit of our class—which they demonstrated over and over again as they told me about their teaching and their own writing.

My students were teaching their students to write the way their experience told them that real writers learn to write. “Writers read a lot,” they

said, “and pick up vocabulary and sentence patterns, a sense of style, as they read.” “Writers learn from reading aloud, paying attention to the sound.” “Writers learn from copying texts by hand as Corbett recommends, from getting the feel of their sentences, from imitating texts.” “They learn from writing and revising work that really means something to them, and from submitting multiple drafts for portfolio grading.” “Writers learn from reading their works to each other.” “Writers learn from teachers who write, who are part of a group of writers.”

Indeed, my students were real writers, in process and in product. Two students had switched from the M.A. to the M.F.A. program in creating writing. One student was trying, with some frustration, to control his sprawling style and vary his repetitive vocabulary. Another was in the process of transforming a collection of personal essays into a Bildungsroman. A poet was experimenting with prose, to see what he’d learn. The prizewinning novelist was completed another novel and won honorable mention in the AWP (Associated Writing Programs) contest. And the most resistant student, the elementary schoolteacher, had edited a book of the uncollected writings of her favorite author, E.B. White, and submitted it to Harper & Row (E.B. White, *Writings*).

Another student, a high school teacher who took “Son of Paradigm Shift” last summer, told me simply, in a letter last fall, “You made me a writer. I’m getting up at 5 every morning to write for an hour before school.” A letter in February said that on the strength of an essay he’d written about fatherhood, he had been invited to become a magazine home repair columnist. In May, his short story won first prize in the Writer’s Federation of Nova Scotia contest, and he has since published two award-winning novels for adolescents.

I have begun the most difficult writing of my life, about my life and the lives of others close, distant, compelling. It’s risky, but exhilarating, to invest so much and care so much, but there is no other choice. I have been invited to share drafts not only with my students, one kind of community, but with an informal network of essayists, another community, whose work is so good that the prospect of their criticism terrifies me. There is no other choice here, either. For this is the way to find our voices, find our families, find ourselves.

## Teaching My Class

*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*

John 8:32

*Religion, morality, and knowledge being essential to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.*

Northwest Ordinance

### PROLOGUE

I was born to teach. I knew this without a doubt from the moment I learned to read and write. Maybe earlier—I can remember trying to teach my baby sister how to crawl, and my younger brother how to dial the telephone. That my pretty flapper mother had taught eight grades concurrently as a one-room country schoolteacher did not escape my notice, even though she had hated the job because every day she had to chop wood for the school's potbellied stove and scrub its manure-caked floor and put up with the sass of the pupils bigger than she was, hulking on the back bench.

That I grew up in a college town where my father was a chemistry professor was heaven on earth. There was lab glassware to be used as doll dishes. There were giant, dripping 5-cent ice cream cones from the college creamery to be devoured after our daily swimming lessons in the college pool. There were music lessons, piano first (I learned to read music before I learned to read words), then violin. There were enticing stacks of books to bring home from weekly trips to the university library. With a mixture of delight and trepidation I often tried to linger as long as possible in the children's room before they turned out the lights, in hopes that I might get locked in overnight and, undetected, could read the whole night through. But, ever obedient to the rules, I always wimped out when the austere librarian hissed, "Closing time."

That we lived across a large field from the elementary school was a bonus. With the welcoming, red-brick Georgian building itself ever in my field of vision, what went on inside was perpetually on my mind. I loved to play school. As the oldest child of three in my family, I was a Lucy long

before Peanuts immortalized this juvenile scold and nag. Before I began first grade I was so fearful that I'd misspell a word and flunk out that I asked my mother to teach me a hard word as a security blanket. She came up with a-n-t-i-c-i-p-a-t-e, which I memorized. Thus armed, I knew it all.

On the pretext of telling the neighbor kids—even towering third and fourth graders—a story they'd never heard before, I would lure them to the row of Campbell's soup cartons I'd arranged as desks under the pines in our New Hampshire neighborhood. I'd hand out the bright Crayolas (broken crayons affronted my sense of propriety), fist-fat pencils from my Detroit grandfather's print shop, and to write on, empty bluebooks discarded by my father's students. Then I'd proceed to impart the lesson *du jour*. I do not remember the substance of a single one of these impromptu discourses, but there were enough occasions, with pupils lured by shameless bribes of jellybeans and chocolate chip cookies smuggled from home, to let me know from the age of six on that teaching would be the great love of my life.

I do, however, remember the need to come up with material of sufficient interest to keep my roving clientele in one place for at least fifteen minutes; if I wanted them to play my game I had to make it worth their while. And I particularly remember the thrill of authority—I knew more than my students did, at least when I chose the subject. I spoke in impeccable Standard English. I could spell better than everyone, except for my arch-rival Patty Towle. (How I got sweet revenge is another story, to be hinted at only in its denouncement. Having convinced Patty that I could make her walk on water, I didn't have to push her into the nearby brook—she fell in of her own volition.) I could read faster than the others, and I could read harder books. Not only could I pronounce all the words, I knew what each one meant, I could use them in complete sentences—and, as self-styled teacher, I could correct the other kids in my Palmer-method handwriting that flowed in precise hills and valleys across the page. I even squandered two weeks' allowance (ten cents) on a package of foil stars to adorn perfect papers. Although I was chosen last on every basketball, volleyball, and softball team throughout my entire elementary school years—was it nerd's fate, or revenge for my insufferability as pedagogue?—my own teachers always picked my eager pencil for every writing chore that came along. What the rest saw as work was to me but child's play.

And, I confess, it still is.

I have proffered this picture of my earliest days as teacher on the assumption that many of us share a number of common characteristics (though maybe you were nicer than I), and that these are what impelled us



to choose careers as teachers. Where else could we have so much fun? Among these conspicuous features are:

- A respect for learning, both the substance and the process.
- A “holy curiosity”—as Einstein says—and a general love of learning.
- A mastery of the standard language.
- A love of words and facility with them, in speech and in writing.
- An appreciation of the context(s) in which learning can take place, formally and informally.
- A sense of mission—that we *should* and *must* teach.
- Recognition that we have some wisdom, information, skill to impart to others.
- Confidence in our ability to communicate what we know.
- The belief that students want (or ought to want) to learn what we have to teach them—that it’s good for them.
- Acknowledgment of the system of order in which learning takes place.
- Respect for the authority which the teacher brings to the classroom.
- The sharing of values, ethics, and point of view of the systems—cultural, political, national—in which the school is situated.
- Expectation that this system and its incorporated values will prevail and endure, in public policy and civic life.
- Later I would add the spirit of critical inquiry, the value of questioning authority, of engaging in dialogue and debate in the pursuit and advancement of knowledge, but at six I was an autocrat.

These characteristics, in combination, label us as members of what I’ll call the *teacher class*—a blend of some attributes of the *intellectual class* (if in America there is such a thing) and the *middle class*. Teachers share the intellectuals’ values of a life of the mind, the search for truth, the free play of ideas, the spirit of critical thinking and reasoned inquiry that are the hallmarks of a liberal education. At the same time, perhaps more bourgeois than thoroughgoing intelligentsia would be, teachers also value skilled use of our standard (i.e. national) language—in speaking, writing, reading, and the host of middle-class virtues implied in such standard language usage. Teachers value their authority, relative classroom autonomy, and the continuity of the systems—social, political, familial—that put them at the head of the classroom and keep them there. Although class status has conventionally been tied to economic or social status (Marx, Veblen, and others), class extends its tentacles into every aspect of life, in and out of school.

That for most of my lifelong career as a teacher I took these teacher-class values for granted should come as no surprise to those who share them; I’ve never met a teacher who thought otherwise. Members of the teacher class are like Texans looking at New Mexico; we can hardly see beyond the vast range of our own territory. We rarely examine our class

status unless painful or pointedly political circumstances insist that we do so. Why try to fix what ain't broke? In fact, only during the writing of this paper have I felt obliged to extract and scrutinize these strands that have been deeply woven into the fabric of a lifetime.

Each of the items on the above list embeds a complex of values; even before we were teachers we were living the values we now teach. As teachers, well-educated and thoroughly socialized, we—by and large—uphold the values of our class, our respective disciplines, and those of the institutions where we teach, even when we cavil and carp about the day-by-day trivia. If we didn't we wouldn't do what we do or be where we are. It is beyond the scope of this paper to identify how congruent the values of the teacher class are with those of the students at any particular institution; would it surprise math majors, say, or marketing or leisure science or computer science or family studies majors to learn that the values, say, of critical thinking and clear communication are embedded in whatever discipline-related courses they're taking?

With all of the above as preamble, it should be clear that our overriding agenda may be identified in a single succinct sentence:

WE WANT OUR STUDENTS TO SHARE OUR CLASS VALUES

That is the thesis of this paper. When we teach composition (and anything else to undergraduates) we teach a complex of the teacher-class values (read *virtues*) embedded in every mainstream institution of higher education in the country. Even at the risk of sounding politically incorrect, the message is plain: *we want our students to share our class values*. That is the overarching purpose of innumerable American colleges and universities, as articulated in their mission statements and implied if not expressly stated in their curricular descriptions. It's all there in the catalogs.

From this agenda, all else follows. It is taken for granted that teachers in every field try to clone their majors, for an academic major is a concentrated means of transmitting not only the state-of-the-art in any given discipline, but its particular ethos and values—necessary to prepare the students for life-after-graduation. Moreover, all teachers of non-majors who care about their students—that is, all of us—try in ways that transcend disciplines to convey the values that matter most to us as human beings. And why not? We're an admirable bunch, as we are fond of saying on occasions of institutional self-congratulation.

When the warm rhetoric of convocations and graduations is translated into cold print in college catalogs it assumes legal status, for students enrolling in the school are entitled to the promises made therein.

Consequently, in an effort to look more closely at who we are and what we teach for, I have examined the mission statements and curricular rationales of a random sample of colleges and universities around the country, as expressed in their undergraduate catalogs.

No discipline or college has a monopoly on the life of the mind that is reflected in “the pursuit of all truth” (Brigham Young University *xii*); in “sustaining a spirit of free inquiry directed to understanding the nature of the universe and the role of mankind in it” (University of Virginia *iv*); or in “seeking and applying truth, and testing whatever truth one believes one has found” (Swarthmore 8). Academic institutions agree on the general principle contained in the Catholic University of America’s mission statement, “The only constraint upon truth is truth itself,” however diverse the manifestations in particular curricula (15).

Likewise, no discipline or college has an exclusive claim on teaching students to develop their “creative abilities” (Sweet Briar 3) or to engage in “critical thinking” (Eastern Connecticut State University 5)—defined by the University of Massachusetts as consisting of “the ability to imagine the consequences of one’s choices, to articulate those consequences, and to increase understanding of one’s relation to the worlds of nature, politics, and work” (12). Such “analytic and creative problem-solving processes . . . form the central bases of intellectual inquiry and cultural achievement,” asserts Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (26). But the ways in which “the capacities of discernment, appreciation, and criticism” enable students to “make informed judgments about complex issues” are translated into specific skills and academic accomplishments have a distinctly teacher class orientation (26).

All college rhetoric books reveal the essentially middle-class advice about writing in standard English offered to freshman writers, as I demonstrate in the next chapter <sup>1</sup>. Virtually every American textbook advocates *self-reliance, respectability, decorum, moderation and temperance, efficiency, order, and cleanliness*. This advice is epitomized in Strunk and White’s normative precepts that favor “plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity” (69)—and patriotism (“*Avoid foreign languages*” 81). A comparable middle-class orientation characterizes the descriptions of Freshman English throughout American college catalogs, as well.

American college students are expected to speak and write in the *lingua franca* of this country; college catalogs reveal no alternatives to English. Their English is to be clear, precise, and to reflect a mastery of the modes of discourse that derive their heritage from Aristotle by way of eighteenth-century Scottish rhetoricians. Although the University of Michigan asserts

that “mastery” of any language “*increases subtlety of mind and sharpens sensitivity to the use and meaning of words in one’s own language,*” and the study of literature “*reveals the avenues of thought and feeling that language can open,*” English is the required language for freshman writing courses (emphasis mine, 19).

Michigan’s rationale is typical: “An English Composition requirement is common to all degrees, since educated men and women should be able to *express themselves clearly in speech and writing in their own language*”—presumably, as long as it’s English, since the required course is identified as *English* composition (emphasis mine). Indeed, as in many schools, Michigan students must demonstrate proficiency in standard English, not some other standard language or dialect, in order to pass into—and out of—a wide range of freshman writing courses. Even the rare school that allows students to pass an introductory literature requirement as Georgetown does, with “literature courses—either in the original or in translation—in another language department, ancient or modern,” obliges “non-native speakers of English” to fulfill the requirement “with courses whose readings are in English” (61). That such requirements override the racial and ethnic backgrounds of minority students is subordinated to the uniform assumption that standard English is the language of the American academy and the necessary basis for all academic transactions outside of foreign language departments.

Thus freshman writing courses reinforce university-wide goals of “*precise communication and experience in the methods of reasoned inquiry*” (emphasis mine, ECSU 5) by “introduc[ing] students to the interrelated and shared modes of verbal communication that are *distinctive to college life—argument, interpretation, analysis, and metaphor*—and whose *various usages substantially delineate what it means to become broadly educated*” (emphasis mine, VPI&SU 26).

Virginia Military Institute, whose undergraduate cadets are expected “to advance through *self-reliance, initiative, and strength of character*” (14)—traits largely dependent on the individual, rather than background or social status—nevertheless maintains a system that fosters the middle-class (and military) virtues of “*punctuality, order, discipline, courtesy, and respect for authority*” (emphasis mine, 14). Indeed, VMI is more explicit than many colleges about the ways in which the institutional goal, the “ability to communicate effectively,” (3) is enforced: “Every cadet is expected to use the English language *clearly, correctly, and thoughtfully*. Any cadet who through *carelessness, indifference, or lack of preparation*

submits *substandard* written work in any course should expect to receive a *reduced grade* or even to *submit additional written work* in order to graduate” (emphasis mine, 9).

At this point, in a sophisticated, cutting-edge analysis, it would be time to spring the surprise, to shed the bourgeois teacher clothes of the ninety-seven-pound wimp and emerge as Supertheorist, whose radically new definition of liberal education—or composition—will forever change the way not only I but everyone else will read and write and teach. Pow! What drama as I sock it to the theory bullies who have been kicking sand into my complacent teacher visage all these years! Scarcely have they suspected the brilliance hidden beneath that 30-SPF sunblock! What power! I savor the thought that my entire introductory narrative could then be read as suave irony, a stance toward which my teacher-class soul has aspired year after futile year.

But alas! For better or worse, when I emerge from that phone booth I’m essentially the same person who went in, inspired and impelled, as are many of my peers, to teach my students from a devotion to the ideals of a liberal education and a love of language which both emanates from and transcends the teacher class. Whether we were born into the teacher class or became wedded to it through years of schooling, it would be hard—perhaps impossible—to do otherwise. The pervasive values that drive institutional and pedagogical expectations of student writing are those that respect standard English as the *lingua franca* of the academy. To speak and write in English that reflects the conventions of spelling, pronunciation, mechanics, syntax—and larger matters of order, clarity, responsible use and acknowledgment of sources—allows all of us, teachers and students alike, to get on with the business of the academy, including the perennial search for truth that is generated by critical thinking, the questioning of authority, and reasoned inquiry.

In the process of teaching the subject, *composition*, we are also *composing* the students. If we encourage—even require—they, in their use of standard English, to speak and write as we do, we are essentially reinforcing American educational norms. America’s great documents of freedom and exaltation of common people, including the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, *Leaves of Grass*, the inscription on the Statue of Liberty, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” are written in the language that inscribes our national values and national character. It is the language that our students, too, must and will write. Just as we do now.

NOTE

1. Eighty-five percent of Americans—all but the super-rich and the very poor—identify themselves as middle-class, says Irving Lewis Allen, a University of Connecticut sociologist. Thus the range of people who at least pay lip service to these values comprehends virtually the entire American populace, irrespective of income, type of job, race, ethnicity, or gender. These are the people who elect school boards and who send their children to the elementary and high schools that use the books which even more emphatically than college textbooks endorse and reinforce these values. That textbooks reflect and transmit community and national values goes without saying.

## *Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise*

*[In good writing,] the words used should be the most expressive that the language affords, provided that they are the most generally understood. Nothing should be expressed in two words that can be as well expressed in one; . . . the whole should be as short as possible, consistent with clearness; . . . summarily, it should be smooth, clear, and short, for the contrary qualities are displeasing.*

Benjamin Franklin, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 2 Aug 1733

*Good prose, The [Freshman Composition] Books tell us, is a duty. Their conception of prose is utilitarian and moral. If language is the means of conscious life, then Good Prose, like Cleanliness, must stand next to Godliness. This perpetual moralizing about language haunts all modern writing about style [and all American composition courses].*

Richard Lanham, "The Prose Problem and 'The Books'"

(*Style: An Anti-Text* 14)

### INTRODUCTION

*I used to go to parties in hopes of meeting new people, but now we live in a small town and everyone knows I'm an English teacher. Therefore I lack, shall we say, je ne sais quoi. No one ever says, "How wonderful that you are introducing my children to the discourse community to which they aspire." No one ever says, "I myself always looked forward to those sessions on critical thinking." No one ever says, "I was empowered by the opportunities for crossing boundaries." Or, "emerging from my gender stereotype." Or, "the chance to revise." Or, "finding my own voice." Or, "inventing my persona of choice." Instead they say, "I guess I'd better watch my grammar." "Why, is she sick?" I have an urge to reply. A friend, also an English teacher, always tells strangers she's a nurse.*

Yes, freshman composition is an unabashedly middle-class enterprise, as this paper will demonstrate. It is not necessary here to rehearse the

well-known economic (income levels) and educational (years of schooling) criteria that sociologists such as Lloyd Warner use in analyzing American social class in the mid-twentieth century. Nor is it to the point of this paper to reiterate the cultural manifestations of American social class in the 1970s and early 80s (such as clothing, cars, house decor, and social behavior) identified in Paul Fussell's snooty anatomization of *Class*, itself an American upstart relation of Nancy Mitford's division of British culture into U and Non-U. Rather, my analysis will identify a number of the major aspects of social class that freshman composition addresses in its aims of enabling students to think and write in ways that will make them good citizens of the academic (and larger) community, and viable candidates for good jobs upon graduation.

Most of the time the middle-class orientation of freshman composition is for the better, as we would hope in a country where eighty-five percent of the people—all but the super-rich and the very poor—identify themselves as middle class (Allen). For freshman composition, in philosophy and pedagogy, reinforces the values and virtues embodied not only in the very existence of America's vast middle class, but in its general well-being—read promotion of the ability to think critically and responsibly, and the maintenance of safety, order, cleanliness, efficiency. These qualities are manifested in a host of social and legal mechanisms intended to ensure an informed citizenry and knowledgeable voting public (R. Brown), safety on the job and on the road, cleanliness of air and water and food, reasonably reliable and uniform maintenance of public health and delivery of public services—phenomena that we tend to take for granted until they are missing, broken, or disrupted. Whereupon we can exercise our right to complain and our energy to improve matters. Yet, to a lesser extent, as this paper will conclude, middle-class standards may operate for the worse, particularly when middle-class teachers punish lower-class students for not being, well, more middle class.

As American Studies scholar Richard Huber observes in *The American Idea of Success*, Benjamin Franklin was “a mirror to his own age and a tutor to succeeding generations” (16). Indeed, in addition to *Poor Richard's Almanac* and *The Way to Wealth* (“industry” and “frugality”), Franklin's posthumous rags-to-riches autobiography has for two centuries been the template for American ascendancy into the middle class. Here Franklin constructed a table of a dozen virtues guaranteed to lead to “moral Perfection,” if practiced consistently. These include Temperance (#1), Order (#3), Resolution (#4), Frugality (#5), Industry (#6, equivalent to Efficiency in its admonitions to “Lose no time. . . . Cut off all unnecessary



Actions”), Moderation (#9, “Avoid Extrems.”), and Cleanliness (#10). Franklin later added #13, Humility (“Imitate Jesus and Socrates”), at a friend’s suggestion (148–50), though whether this is a matter of appearance or reality remains open to debate—artful persona or crafty hypocrisy? Even as these virtues have been translated to freshman composition, their moral connotations remain.

It is not surprising that the principles of classical rhetoric were transmuted into formulas by the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century rhetoricians, Franklin’s contemporaries. However aristocratic its theoretical origins may have been, rhetoric as we know it was transformed by those rhetoricians—Adam Smith, George Campbell, Hugh Blair, and Richard Whatley—and translated by Alexander Bain, Adams Sherman Hill, and Barrett Wendell into nineteenth- and twentieth-century pedagogical practices and textbooks (See Brereton; summarized in Bizzell and Herzberg 645–65). As we will see, Strunk and White and Troyka and Trimbur and Marius and a host of others carry on this tradition to this day.

Composition is taught by middle-class teachers in middle-class institutions to students who are middle-class either in actuality or in aspiration—economic if not cultural. Indeed, one of the major though not necessarily acknowledged reasons that freshman composition is in many schools the only course required of all students is that it promulgates the middle-class values that are thought to be essential to the proper functioning of students in the academy. When students learn to write, or are reminded once again of how to write (which of course they should have learned in high school), they also absorb a vast subtext of related folkways, the whys and hows of good citizenship in their college world, and, by extrapolation, of the workaday world for which their educations are designed to prepare them. In this—as perhaps in any—middle-class enterprise, the students’ vices must be eradicated and they must be indoctrinated against further transgressions before they, now pristine and proper, can proceed to the real business of the university. Like swimmers passing through the chlorine footbath en route to plunging into the pool, students must first be disinfected in Freshman English.

Although class, perhaps more than any other feature, forms the basis for much of what the profession as well as the general public expects of freshman composition, the term is virtually absent from the titles and key-word indexes of non-Marxist professional literature and—even with Marxism factored in (see France; Fitts and France)—seldom found in the composition studies data bases for the past quarter-century. Nevertheless, class is always with us. For instance, class has been embedded in the elaborate

analyses of literacy that have abounded in the literature ever since Mina Shaughnessy threw up her hands at the mound of CUNY open admissions essays that formed the data base for *Errors and Expectations*. Class is a major determinant of much of Shirley Brice Heath's material in *Ways with Words*, where the population of her entire study, the inhabitants of Trackton and Roadville, is consistently identified as "working class." The first paperback edition of Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* is subtitled *The Struggles and Achievements of America's Educational Underclass*. Class is a conspicuous feature of Rose's examples and analysis, just as it undergirds Linda Flower's *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning*. Yet as recently as 1993, as chair of MLA's Division of Teaching Writing, I issued a call for program papers on intersections of race, class, and gender in composition studies, and received only one proposal on class—in comparison with a dozen on race and ninety-four on gender. Nevertheless, although the C-word scarcely appears in titles or subtitles until as recently as 1994 (see Hourigan), with the advent of multicultural concerns in the late 1980s came an explicit focus on race, ethnicity, and gender, and with this an implicit concern with class. Until very recently, if composition studies professionals and teachers in general saw class—whatever class we saw—we took it for granted.

*Until I started dating boys my parents didn't approve of, the concept of class was unarticulated and unacknowledged in the New Hampshire college town where I grew up. In Durham, site of the University of New Hampshire where my father—the double doctorate son of a German immigrant printer and his housemaid wife—taught, town was gown, at least from the perspective of everyone I knew. The town library was the university library; ditto the swimming pool, tennis courts, skating rink, greenhouse (with a pool of carp-in-residence), theater, concert hall, dairy (the UNH flocks and herds supplied eggs, milk, and celebrated ice cream to faculty and students), orchard, and woods. That all of these facilities—wholesome, clean, orderly—were maintained by a support staff (who didn't live in expensive Durham) never registered on me, at any rate, for all the children who could walk to school were from faculty families.*

*Indeed, the main social distinction in elementary school was between the town kids and the "bus children," who lived beyond the two-mile limit and couldn't participate in extracurricular activities because they had to catch the bus home immediately after school. It was even cool to be a "bus child" because Weldon MacDonald, our class's natural leader, was not only handsome and smart, but the best artist and the best athlete. That his boots sometimes smelled*

*of manure and his clothes of kerosene meant it was all right for the other bus children to smell that way. That Weldon in sixth grade kissed older girlfriends in the cloakroom, seventh and eighth graders whose developed figures made them “bust children”—a joke I considered unrepeatably salacious—seemed incredibly suave. That Weldon did not go on to high school, despite the repeated urgings of the entire faculty, because he had to work on the family farm, seemed incredibly sad.*

*How could Weldon leave school at thirteen, when we town children knew we were destined for Dover High or prep school, and then college? At Dover High, where the Durham kids became “bus children,” Joan and Molly and Carolyn—Dover town kids—and I became best friends. We were dutiful daughters; although smitten with Elizabeth Taylor in National Velvet, we looked like dowdy versions of Sylvia Plath—pin-curled hair, white Peter Pan collars, and full skirts that reached to the tops of our bobby sox. We were chronic readers and I, at least, did all the extra credit as well as the assigned homework.*

*That we all spoke and wrote standard English, using good grammar, accurate spelling, and impeccable penmanship (except for the circles over the I’s) is to state the obvious. That none of us smoked, or drank, or kissed below the neck also goes without saying, but any extracurricular activity that lacked cachet was sure to find us: the Latin Club, the class play, the chorus, the school paper (The—what else?—School Spirit) in whose service we recruited replicas of ourselves. Why my boyfriend, a voc-ed guy who hunted, fished, built dories, said “ain’t,” wore too-tight jeans and dyed his suede shoes bright blue, invested two whole years in me I cannot now imagine. I could not at the time acknowledge the nature of his appeal, nor understand that my parents’ continual harping on his grammar embedded a very different rhetoric indeed.*

A credit to our school, it is not surprising that my best girlfriends and I all became teachers. Two of us, in fact, continue to teach English: Carolyn (widowed at forty-two with four teenagers) returned to Dover High as drama and prize-winning speaking coach, and I, a card-carrying member of NCTE, CCC, MLA, and WPA, have taught at colleges and universities in the North, South, East, Midwest, and far West—all thoroughly middle-class. Indeed, we—and thousands like us—could scarcely have found a profession that more thoroughly allowed us to preach what we had been practicing all our lives (my brief college engagement to an engineering student who spelled writing with two t’s was doomed from the start), for all of us knew right from the start how to function as middle-class teachers. There was no other way. And, by and large, there still isn’t for those of us

teaching at high schools and colleges that aim to prepare their students to do mainstream work and seek mainstream careers.

#### MIDDLE-CLASS VIRTUES, VALUES, AND FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

Although other models are possible, the middle-class pedagogical model, replete with Franklinesque virtues, has remained normative and dominant from the emergence of composition as a college course in the late nineteenth century to the present (see Brereton, Russell). As middle-class teachers of college composition, our courses are saturated with middle-class values, no matter what theories, pedagogical philosophies, or content we embrace. However sensitive we—and our students—are to race, gender, other current political issues, literary theories, and composition studies research, freshman composition in particular is an embodiment of middle-class morality. Here are some of its hallmarks.

*Self-reliance, responsibility.* Members of the middle class learn from the cradle to assume responsibility for their own actions, their own lives (“The Lord helps those who help themselves”). Literacy is taken for granted; it sustains the ability to read and write well enough to function as a parent, a good citizen, a wise consumer, a capable employee, and more. We teach students that writing conveys power and authority. We teach them that it is the writer’s responsibility to control the language and consequently its message and its effect on the audience, lest that authority be dissipated. Peter Elbow informally divides *Writing with Power*, his manifesto offering writing power to the people into “Getting Power over the Writing Process,” “Getting Power over Others,” and “Getting Power through the Help of Others” (4).

Middle-class composition teachers, ever Emersonian in spirit, stress the importance of self-reliance (“Your work must be your *own* work”), even in nominally collaborative classrooms. We are death on plagiarism. Every composition handbook I’ve examined, for whatever level of student, contains advice of which Troyka’s is typical: “Plagiarism is like stealing. It is a serious offense that can be grounds for failure of a course or expulsion from a college.” Ignorance is no excuse; “All college students are expected to know what plagiarism is and how to avoid it” (405). From sea to shining sea, as promulgated by American colleges and universities, the cardinal sin of plagiarism is a heinous affront to the middle-class value of honesty, manifested in respect for others’ property.

*Respectability* (“middle-class morality”). The middle-class concern with propriety and correctness is reflected in our rule-bound handbooks, whose precepts form the bottom line in even the most process-oriented teaching.

Sharon Crowley argues, in fact, that current-traditional rhetoric, with its emphasis on forms, formulas, and rules, “maintains its hold on writing instruction because it is fully consonant with academic assumptions about the appropriate hierarchy of authority” (66). Indeed, she says, the process-oriented composing strategies that sprang up in the early seventies did not supplant current-traditional epistemology, they were grafted onto it and “were used to help students produce current-traditional texts” (65). A quarter century later, she sees no change in theory, strategy, or substance.

Moreover, no matter what kinds of writing assignments we give, as middle-class teachers we expect freshman papers—on whatever subject—to fall within the realm of normative discourse in subject, point of view, values implied. By and large, we get what we expect. But when we receive a paper that incorporates what Mary Louise Pratt calls “unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique” (19) and—intentionally or unwittingly—transgresses these normative boundaries, we go to pieces. In the social space of the classroom, which Pratt defines as a “contact zone, where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34), as Richard Miller points out in “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone,” we are ill-prepared to deal with alien topics or points of view that are, say, racist, misogynistic, sadistic, or otherwise debased or debasing. Our initial, middle-class impulse is to suppress the topic, to punish or try to rehabilitate the author, or to deliberately overlook the paper’s attempt to wreak havoc in the contact zone and comment only on its “formal features and surface errors.” But, as Miller says, “[W]ould changing the word choice/spelling errors/verb agreement problems/organization really ‘improve’ the essay that assaults or affronts? “Would such changes help inch it towards being, say, an excellent gay-bashing essay, one worthy of an A?” (393–94).

*Decorum, propriety.* When teachers do address an offensive paper, we maintain our middle-class decorum and phrase potentially confrontative comments in language that is tentative, qualified. As Straub and Lunsford’s analysis of the responses of a dozen exemplary composition studies teachers reveals, not one takes direct issue with the morality of the former street gang member who acknowledges without emotion “getting into trouble and fights,” “sucker punching” victims, and “beating someone up or vandalizing someones property” (101–3). “I surely would be glad to learn more about gangs” (Richard Larson); “There’s something intriguing or even moving about your low key tone here, but I’m also curious to know a lot more how you actually felt” (Peter Elbow); “I can’t really see the whole picture . . . why did you sucker punch these people? Were they other gang members?”

(Chris Anson) (99). We have met these teachers and they are us, speaking in a double-voiced teacher code which embeds moral criticism so discreetly that we can't be sure the students' linguistic codes, let alone their codes of ethics, will recognize the horror, the horror.

Teachers, implicitly equating propriety with good character as well as good manners, also expect decorous writing from their students and penalize papers that strike them as insubordinate. Sarah Warshauer Freedman's ingenious study teased out subliminal subtleties of response. She found significant differences in the tone of essays written on the same topic by students and by professionals, whose "writing seemed more informal and casual than the students." The professionals wrote as their readers' peers, rather than as subordinate students, "and thus felt free to write informally and casually." They frequently used the first person pronoun, *I*, and speaking familiarly and directly to their readers, "tried to establish closeness with their informality." Their prose "took on the tone of a friendly letter, full of dashes, addressed to a reader of equal or lower status." Although student and professional papers were intermingled for grading, the teachers believed they were all written by students and expected the writing to reflect subordination appropriate to the normative student-teacher relationship. When the papers didn't use the "linguistic forms that show respect, deference, and the proper degree of formality," the teachers, apparently affronted, reacted "against the professionals' too familiar tone" and retaliated in their grading (340–42).

*That the use of the first person, with or without any accompanying autobiography, continues to strike many faculty as indecorous, inappropriate in academic writing has been debated vigorously in professional literature throughout the past decade (Elbow "Reflections," Bartholomae and Petrosky; Hesse). That even novice teachers, innocent of the debate as well as the literature, begin their careers with this opinion was brought home to me the second night of my indoctrination class for new TAs. To shake up their sense of style, I always ask new TAs to write an essay in some variety of real-world language. So that evening, in preparation for their own essays on "Why I Write," we had discussed the crafted, constructed nature of an autobiographical persona, as illustrated in my own "Finding a Family, Finding a Voice" (chapter one), a partly personal essay on teaching new TAs to teach writing by having them write substantive first-person essays of their own.*

*A student, sweet and sincere, asked if he could confer with me privately in my office after class. "Of course," I said, and after he deposited my books on the desk and shut the door, he said, obviously embarrassed, "I want to ask you*

a personal question. You don't have to answer it if you don't want to." He paused, gathering courage. "Did anyone ever attack you for writing in the first person?" "No," I answered, surprised. "Why do you ask?" "Because your essay is so," he hesitated, clearly thrown off balance by the discovery of personal pronouns in the grove of academe, "so, so confessional."

Although personal, that essay is not in the least confessional. This characteristic point of view, it should be noted, is epitomized in Marguerite Helmers's confusion throughout chapter six of *Writing Students*, where she mounts a personal attack on personal writing. From that perspective she lambasts writing represented by Nancy Sommers's Braddock award-winning "Between the Drafts," for its "self-help," "confessional," "Oprah-like" qualities. Helmers concludes—wrongly—that "The personal . . . is at root an anti-intellectual gesture, unlikely to generate either renewed intellectualism or disciplinary respectability for composition" (148).

*I explained briefly why the terms are not synonymous, but by then it was nearly 10 P.M., too late to belabor the point. The TAs' weekly teaching journals continued to indicate a growing comfort with multiple modes of discourse, inspired less by my example than by another TA's stunning paper on "Why I write in a language my mother does not speak": "I find my old voice, reconnect with the family lore and my tribe's habits, and slip back into my native tongue as naturally as I switch back to English at the border. My self may be divided, but the separation between my French and English sides is as thin as a layer of skin" (Genevieve Brassard).*

*Moderation and temperance.* The Golden Mean, where else would the middle class roost? Freedman's research on non-normative student papers, actual or presumed, and the responses they elicit, genteel or retaliatory, illustrates one major area in which these values are manifested. Another emerges in considerations of style.

Although free spirits have been known to ridicule Polonius's advice to Laertes as a model of bourgeois sententiousness, that teachers continue to assign it as a set piece for students to memorize attests to its embodiment of the values we honor. The sense of style contained in these values ("rich, not gaudy"; "familiar, but by no means vulgar") is reiterated today in the rules of Strunk and White, who together constitute the American Polonius: "Place yourself in the background" (#1); "Do not inject opinion" (#17).

It would be as hard for anyone educated in American schools in the past thirty-five years to escape the influence of advice embodied in *The*

*Elements of Style* (itself a direct descendant of conventional eighteenth-century advice) or its equivalent indicates (see also Russell, chapter four) as it would for any post-World War II American baby to escape the influence of Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care*. "The approach to style," say these books, "is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity" (Strunk 69). This precept governs much of our stylistic advice to students: "Be clear" (#16); "Prefer the standard to the offbeat" (#21); "Avoid fancy words" (#14); "Use figures of speech sparingly" (#18). And be patriotic: "Avoid foreign languages" (#20) (70–81). Among textbook authors, only Richard Lanham in *Style: An Anti-Textbook* takes issue with the premises of prevailing advice, "clarity, plainness, sincerity," pronouncing them "incomplete and seriously misleading" (ix). Lanham's critique of American advice is a perceptive critique of American values as filtered through freshman composition: "Good prose does not come from a one-time inoculation [in freshman composition]. It has to be sustained by the standards of a society, by that society's sense of style. It has to be encouraged, appreciated, rewarded." But nowhere in American society does this happen any more, asserts Lanham; students asked to read prose aloud become "acutely uncomfortable" at having to pay attention to their language (7). Thus his *Anti-Textbook* satirically—but eschewing references to Deconstruction—extols "The Uses of Obscurity," "The Opaque Style," and "The Delights of Jargon"—joy and *jouissance*—in playing with language. Nevertheless, Lanham's own subsequent textbooks, videotapes, and CD-ROMs, especially his elegant *Analyzing Prose*, commend the classic clarity and simplicity they themselves illustrate.

*Thrift.* The middle-class virtue of thrift in domestic economy ("waste not, want not") is likewise reflected in the precepts of stylistic economy. Concepts such as Orwell's "Never use a long word where a short one will do" and "If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out" ("Politics" 176) and Strunk and White's "Omit needless words"—"A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences" (23)—govern American textbooks and much of our red-penciling.

To make the point economically, I will cite but a single example from a single, representative volume, Joseph Trimmer's tenth edition of James MacCrimmon's venerable *Writing With a Purpose*. Trimmer's advice is itself short and to the point: "Economical prose achieves an equivalence between the number of words used and the amount of meaning they convey. A sentence is not economical because it is short, or wordy because it is long." Nevertheless, continues Trimmer, "Wordiness—the failure to achieve economy—is a common writing problem." The two most common



ways to eliminate wordiness within sentences are—shades of Strunk and White—“deleting useless words and phrases and substituting more economical expressions for wordy ones” (236–7).

*Efficiency* is a related middle-class virtue, for the prudent middle class squanders neither time (“time is money”) nor words. As Richard Marius advises students in *A Writer’s Companion*, “Professional writers are efficient. They use as few words as possible to say what they want to say. They use short words rather than long ones when the short words express their meaning just as well. They get to the point quickly” (10).

To do so implies an efficiency of process, as well as product. The advice on writing process that pervaded the 1980s—including much of my own—was concerned with enabling student writers to attain an efficient, and therefore by definition effective, writing process. Linda Flower’s widely used *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing*, like many of Flower and Hayes’s protocol analyses, embeds a model of industrial efficiency. Flower advises writers to eschew wasteful methods, such as rigid rules (“simple-minded and inadequate for more complex problems”) and trial and error (“expensive in terms of time”) in favor of heuristics, “efficient strategies or discovery procedures” that are powerful because “they have a high probability of succeeding” (44–45). Today the concept of efficiency remains operative even when the writing process itself is identified, as Lunsford and Connors explain in *The St. Martin’s Handbook*, as “repetitive, erratic,” recursive, “and often messy” rather than proceeding “in nice, neat steps.” Nevertheless, “ideally,” say the authors, “writing can be a little like riding a bicycle: with practice the process becomes more and more automatic” (3–4). “Effective writing,” reiterates Trimmer, “emerges from effective decision making” (4).

*Order.* The middle-class value of “A place for everything and everything in its place” implies that life, society, and households run better—and indeed are more virtuous—when the participants can know, respect, and follow a predictable, conspicuous pattern. Disorganized writing is as disreputable as disorderly conduct, for it both implies mental laxity and shows disrespect for one’s readers. In preparation for writing the *St. Martin’s Handbook*, Lunsford and Connors “analyzed teachers’ global comments on three thousand student essays, a stratified sample of twenty-one thousand marked student essays gathered from teachers throughout the United States” in the 1980s (I-1). They found, not surprisingly, that in addition to being spelling and grammar sleuths (see Connors and Lunsford, “Frequency” 400–1), teachers are organization police, in search of “clear and logical organization of information”—in format, overall structure, and in the structure of individual paragraphs

and sentences (*St. Martin's* I-7). Consequently, Lunsford and Connors devote four chapters and numerous subsections of the *Handbook* to these matters—about par for most current handbooks.

Likewise, one of Marius's cardinal principles is that "A good essay is well-integrated; it does not drift without clear purpose from item to item," but rather, meets "the *requirement*" (emphasis mine—whose requirement Marius does not say, but the implication is of a cultural or professional norm) "that an essay have a single guiding purpose and that it be clear throughout." Thus, says Marius, "A good essay will march step by step to its destination. Each step will be clearly marked; it will depend on what has gone before, and it will lead gracefully to what comes afterward" (*A Writer's Companion* 55–56). Marius's advice, the antithesis of postmodernism, is proffered more categorically than, for instance, that of Strunk and White, who even while saying "Choose a suitable design and hold to it" (#12), acknowledge that "in some cases the best design is no design, as with a love letter, which is simply an outpouring" (15). Nevertheless, academic necessity puts most teachers in Marius's camp; students write no love letters on our watch.

*Cleanliness* is next to godliness in the middle-class pantheon. Dirt, like disorder, is a privilege of the filthy rich and the slovenly poor. Some teachers, reflecting popular prejudices and community standards, patrol for clean language and a suitably respectful authorial stance and persona (see *Decorum*, above). No matter how informal, slangy, even profane our speech outside of class, teachers and textbooks and college standards concur on the importance of Standard English as the *lingua franca* for writing in the academy. So taken for granted is this normative view of language that it is rarely stated overtly, although it is manifested from kindergarten to college in workbooks, usage tests, and lists of words commonly mispronounced and misspelled. It undergirds the college and admissions placement and testing industry and the English Only movement; its spectre looms large over the myriad attempts to write and enforce state and national standards, whether these emanate from parents, politicians, psychometricians, or other professional groups.

This normative view underlies much composition studies research, as well. For example, Shaughnessy's sensitive analysis of the "stunningly unskilled," error-laden writing of thousands of open admissions students in *Errors and Expectations* leads ultimately to the expectation that sensitive, insightful teachers will assume that their students are "capable of learning" what they themselves have learned, and what they now teach—standard English (292). Three semesters of basic writing will, if done

right, give students standard English facility with syntax, punctuation, grammar, spelling, vocabulary, “order and development,” and “academic forms” (285–86). And, as David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” argues, when entering students have learned to talk the talk, they can walk the walk.

Moreover, like middle-class housewives, teachers require “cleaned up” papers—free of the detritus of drafting, bearing no smudges of the labor required to transform a messy manuscript into a model of elegance and propriety. At the level of freshman composition, neatness and cleanliness—spelling, mechanics, MLA and APA documentation styles—preoccupy teachers marking student papers, as reported in Connor and Lunsford’s “Frequency of Formal Errors.” Composition handbooks, requisite reading for every freshman, abound in good housekeeping rules; in their *Handbook*, Lunsford and Connors’s research translates into ninety-nine pages of rules, about twelve and one-half percent of its total volume. A plethora of housekeeping tools exist in the form of computer spell checkers, style checkers, a programmed thesaurus, and error detectors (Trimmer 466–67). Interestingly, the closer the author comes to professional status, the higher are the cleanliness stakes and the thicker the manuals of advice on the minutiae of technically precise papers. Strunk and White, Marius, Joseph Williams’s *Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, and Lanham’s *Revising Prose* are skinny books; the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, intended for English majors and graduates, like most manuals, has bulked up from the svelte 30-page *MLA Style Sheet* of 1951 to 155 pages in 1977 to 298 pages in the fourth edition (1995). The current edition of the publishers’ bible, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, is 921 pages.

*Punctuality.* The middle class ideally “runs like clockwork,” arranging time efficiently on a tight schedule, as symbolized by bulging filofax date-books and computerized calendars. Freshman composition, with its recurring expectation of work to be turned in on time—including intermediate drafts of work-in-progress, with penalties for non-performance, for lateness, and for other evidences of haste or sloppiness (read error and sin)—is the university’s efficient means of indoctrinating new students in the ways of the academic world. Even the Muse must report for duty on time.

*Delayed gratification.* “All things come round to him who will but wait,” (Longfellow, *Student’s Tale*). It is a middle-class virtue to work and scrimp and save in the present for long-term gains in the future—such as the fruits of an education or an insurance policy. It is the collective belief of the American educational enterprise that freshman composition will help students do better in their other classes, and beyond college in the life—almost

assuredly middle class—for which their education has prepared them. How could they fail to benefit, given all the middle-class virtues embodied in the course? Why else would freshman composition be the single required course in nearly all American colleges? As we have seen, to ensure the attainment of responsibility, respectability, moderation, thrift, efficiency, order, cleanliness, and punctuality in one's writing and in one's life as well, is among the principal aims of freshman composition. Introducing students to *belles lettres* or Great Books or the tease of theory (notwithstanding the delights of Derrida and the charm of Cixous) is almost incidental.

*I read the penultimate version of this paper at a departmental colloquium with the usual trepidation that comes from having to live with the colleagues—and the consequences—afterward. “In your concern with style and proper academic behavior,” said my astute critics in spirited discussion, “you left out the most important aspect of what we do in freshman composition. We don’t conceive of writing as the vehicle of bourgeois indoctrination, even though Standard English and what that implies is every college’s lingua franca. We use the course to teach and encourage students to think for themselves, to read and write critically. Put that in.” So, in the spirit with which Franklin added the thirteenth virtue, “Humility,” at the suggestion of friends I append the principal virtue of freshman composition as we know it today—a latecomer to the course, which accounts for its tardy appearance here.*

*Critical thinking.* Self-reliance and the assumption of responsibility underlie the notion of critical thinking and reasoning, historically the essence of American democracy. Historian Richard Brown points out the necessity for citizens in the revolutionary era to “acquire sufficient knowledge of history, law, and politics to be able to recognize and confront the approach of tyranny.” Later, in the early republic of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison, “that meaning was augmented by the idea that voting citizens should be sufficiently informed and critically minded to be able to choose public officials wisely. Education and experience should enable them to see through the seductive rhetoric of demagogues and rise above parochial self-interest” to “elect wise men of good character to carry out public policy” (205).

However, the spirit of critical inquiry implied in the history of the republic was largely absent from freshman composition—philosophy, syllabi, textbooks, and writing assignments—during the first century of that subject in the American college curriculum (roughly 1870–1970). The primary documents Brereton proffers in *The Origins of Composition Studies in*

*the American College, 1875–1925* reflect an overriding concern for grammatical and linguistic correctness, “accurate” reading and understanding of literary texts, and an appreciation of style—but scarcely a trace of critical thinking. David Russell’s curricular history, *Writing in the Academic Disciplines, 1870–1990*, corroborates this emphasis, on “sivilizing,” in the Huck Finn sense.

Until the writing across the curriculum movement began in the early 1980s, says Russell, students throughout American colleges and universities “wrote primarily to demonstrate knowledge, not to discover or communicate it” (234). There were three major exceptions, curricula developed (but not promulgated because of the onset of World War II) by I.A. Richards (257–58); the University of Chicago’s Great Books program; and Santa Fe’s experimental St. John’s College, where students were expected to produce writing that “bears traces of struggle” with great ideas (196, 191). These, along with Louise Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration* (first edition, 1938) would appear to be the intellectual forebears of our contemporary concern for critical thinking—so pervasive in most freshman rhetorics, readers, and writing assignments that we tend to take this relatively recent orientation for granted.

The dramatic post-World War II transformation of American higher education from an upper-middle-class enterprise to a mass enterprise is signaled in a variety of ways, from the open admissions programs to multicultural curricular emphases. Freire’s revolutionary *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1969) offers a compelling political rationale for these changes; liberatory pedagogy can and should encourage critical thinking, among other things (see Conclusion).

A single, conspicuous manifestation of this pervasive philosophy should suffice to illustrate the rationale of critical thinking, Bartholomae and Petrosky’s *Ways of Reading*. The teacher’s *Preface* explains: “We wanted selections that invite students to be active, critical readers, that present powerful readings of common experience, that open up the familiar world and make it puzzling, rich, and problematic. . . . that invite students to be active readers and to take responsibility for their acts of interpretation.” So the editors avoided “short set-pieces” that “solve all the problems they raise,” maintaining reading as the educationally conventional “act of appreciation.” Instead, students must grapple with such intellectually and rhetorically difficult essays as Adrienne Rich’s “When We Dead Awaken,” Michel Foucault’s “Panopticism” (from *Discipline and Punish*), and Jane Tompkins’s “Indians” and learn to construct coherent readings “by writing and rewriting” (vi–vii). Indeed, Bartholomae and Petrosky sock it to the students with their

opening paragraph: “Reading involves a fair measure of push and shove. You make your mark on a book and it makes its mark on you. Reading is not simply a matter of hanging back and waiting for a piece, or its author, to tell you what the writing has to say. . . . We’d like you to imagine that . . . you are in a position to speak back, to say something of your own . . .” (1).

## CONCLUSION

American autobiographical literature is full of success stories, emblems of the American Dream. Autobiographies depict immigrants, ethnic and racial minorities, poor and working-class youth rising in status, income, reputation, and self-esteem through the practice of these middle-class virtues, from Benjamin Franklin to Frederick Douglass to Richard Rodriguez and Maxine Hong Kingston. The latter three are powerful literary autobiographies, as well.

John Trimbur reads Mike Rose’s autobiographical *Lives on the Boundary* as “a kind of pilgrim’s progress, from his struggles as a high-school student who arises, miraculously, from the slough of Voc-Ed despond, through college . . . to his redemptive work as a teacher of the neglected and underprepared.” Trimbur fears that readers will read *Lives on the Boundary* exactly as most teachers do, and that they will love this book for what Trimbur considers the wrong reasons, as “another comforting American success story of an individual who, through the power of education and the guidance of more experienced teacher-mentors, takes the predictable road to self-improvement and upward mobility, from the mean streets of Los Angeles to the halls of UCLA” (“Articulation Theory” 238).

Such an interpretation reinforces the “literacy myth,” says Trimbur, “the moral consensus” that since the mid-nineteenth century has erroneously represented “the ability to read and write as a social explanation of success and failure in class society, a token of middle-class propriety, and a measure to divide the worthy from the unworthy poor”—or students, as the case may be (238). Trimbur quotes J. Elspeth Stuckey’s *The Violence of Literacy* to illustrate the argument that “literacy is a system of oppression that works against entire societies as well as against certain groups from within given populations and against individual people” (Stuckey 64). From this point of view, says Trimbur, “to speak of the transformative powers of literacy for the individual, as Rose does, at best is naïve and at worst reproduces a discourse of equal opportunity and predictably unequal results, thereby turning systematic inequality into the result of differences in individual effort and talent, not of social determinations” (250).

Thus whether these canonical American autobiographies and Rose's *Lives* represent a dangerous middle-class myth or present true and thoroughly inspiring success stories is as much a matter of one's politics as one's social class. The views of Trimbur, Stuckey, France, and other academic Marxists notwithstanding, such stories embody what American education has historically been dedicated to—not putting the “finishing” veneer on an elite class, but enabling the transformation and mobility of lives across the boundaries, from the margins to the mainstreams of success and assimilation on middle-class terms.

For there are other stories behind these stories. Trimbur's ambivalent critique allows for multiple readings of the dominant story: “If professional practices and discourses,” such as those in Bartholomae's “Inventing the University,” Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, and Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*,

typically represent the dispossessed as a client population in need of the intervention of expert benefactors, the political valence and cultural meaning of professional work nevertheless cannot be guaranteed in advance as an accommodation to the dominant culture. . . . Professional expertise, as I believe *Lives on the Boundary* demonstrates, can also articulate a sense of solidarity with the aspirations and purposes of the dispossessed. It all depends on practice (249).

As Freire points out, education does not necessarily have to enact the “banking concept,” with students “storing the deposits entrusted to them” by oppressive middle-class teachers bent on suppressing their “critical consciousness.” Freire claims, as I and many teachers—middle class and otherwise—would agree, that “the oppressed are not ‘marginals,’ are not men living ‘outside’ society. They have always been ‘inside’—inside the structure which made them ‘beings for others.’ The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’” (61).

Such Freirean transformations are the thrust of the narratives of education research, teacher's tales, and autobiography after autobiography. These are the stories that engage the hearts, minds, lives, and commitment of most of us middle-class teachers in the hope (whether or not validated by contemporary conditions) that our students will have equal opportunity access to the middle-class life. This includes the authority and power to “become ‘beings for themselves’”—not only in the accommodationist mode of Booker T. Washington, but in the transformationist mode, varied and vigorous, of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Pauli Murray, Anne Moody and Maya Angelou (see Royster 35 ff.).

Thus even with a Marxist reading of *Lives on the Boundary*, Trimbur allows Rose—and all of us middle-class teachers—a way out of inextricably attaching literacy to “the reproduction of class relations in advanced capitalist society.” Literacy does not necessarily have to have the “locked-in . . . class character” which so repels Stuckey and other revisionist critics. For, as Rose and innumerable teachers like him understand, literacy “is not only a tool of a class-based ranking system, but also a cultural resource embedded in and persistently available” to all through popular culture and nontraditional materials. Neither the educational process nor its goals necessarily have to result in cultural deracination. As works by Zitkala-Sa, N. Scott Momaday, Maxine Hong Kingston, Gary Soto, and Judith Ortiz Cofer (among a host of authors) reveal, autobiographers don’t need to repudiate their class or ethnicity to write memorably about it—even if they do so “in a language my mother does not speak.” Indeed, with authority, dignity, humor, anger, works such as *The School Days of an Indian Girl*, *The Names*, *Woman Warrior*, *Small Faces*, and *Silent Dancing* demonstrate the power of autobiographies to promote an understanding and appreciation of the lives, values, and cultures they represent. Thus contemporary popular autobiographies, among other materials, reveal that standards of literacy can be reconceived, in and out of the classroom, “to serve popular aspirations and democratic goals” (Trimbur 250–51).

Teaching materials can be similarly reconceived. In 1972 the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication implicitly acknowledged these “popular aspirations and democratic goals” when it adopted the policy statement “The Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” a succinct affirmation of “the students’ right to . . . the dialect of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their identity and style.” The statement continues, “The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans.” It concludes, “We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language” (CCC, fall 1974, inside front cover). The Fall 1974 special issue of CCC, devoted to amplifying this statement, encouraged teachers to develop teaching materials diverse in dialects and in the cultures such dialects represent, including “examples of writing which is clear and vigorous despite the use of non-standard forms (at least as described by the handbook). . . . We do not condone ill-organized, imprecise, undefined, inappropriate writing in any dialect; but we are especially distressed to find



sloppy writing approved so long as it appears with finicky correctness in 'school standard' while vigorous and thoughtful statements in the less prestigious dialects are condemned" (8–9). "Common sense tells us that if people want to understand one another, they will do so," concludes the Committee on CCC Language Statement, "And humanity tells us that we should allow every man the dignity of his own way of talking" (18).

This philosophy—its unwitting sexism notwithstanding—governed several textbooks of the 1970s, such as Friedrich and Kuester's *It's Mine and I'll Write It That Way*; respected sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman remains its witty spokesperson. This philosophy epitomizes the attitudes of literacy researchers, such as Heath, Flower, and (in his later work) James Berlin. Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways With Words*, for example, implicitly affirms every manifestation of literacy among the working-class people of Roadville and Trackton, of whatever age or occupation. However, despite recent work of Berlin, Flower ("Literate Action," "Negotiating"), and Heath herself, these studies have not yet been translated into classroom practices, and Flower encounters student resistance when she tries (see "Negotiating" especially 82–83). I have been unable to find any post-1970s college or university policies, curricula, or textbooks that advocate marked deviations from the standard *lingua franca* (see chapter two) "the books," as Lanham calls them, remain bastions of middle-class linguistic morality.

Like it or not, despite the critiques of academic Marxists, we are a nation of Standard English. Indeed, students themselves want and expect their work to be conducted in Standard English; their own concept of the language they should use reflects the linguistic standards of the communities in which they expect to live and work after earning their degrees. Characteristically, students resent—as Linda Flower acknowledges and explores in "Negotiating the Meaning of Difference"—the attempts of well-meaning liberal academics to legitimate Black English Vernacular and other grammatically coherent but "nonstandard" Englishes. Student Drena, for instance, has grown up understanding that BEV is "yet another racist stereotype identifying the 'natural' language of Black people (as a group) with the language of rural life and Southern folklore or rough, urban streets and poverty—in either case with a language regularly attacked and ridiculed as improper, substandard, and ignorant" (76). Although she and her peers in Flower's Community Literacy Center ultimately engage in "a hybrid discourse of talking and testifying, conversation analysis and argument, list and story" that Flower sees as the basis for the "discourse in intercultural collaboration" to which she is committed, there is little evidence that American culture at large, despite increasingly

multicultural classrooms, will grant equal opportunity for “different voices, different signifying systems, and interpretive styles” (86) to be valued on par with Standard English. As Flower herself observes, “multicultural contact in classrooms does not erase the history that lives in students” (44), or the values of their teachers and the school systems that determine the curriculum.

Nevertheless, as teachers we, like our students, are citizens of the world; all of us have an ethical as well as a cultural obligation to respect the worlds’ multiple ways of living and of speaking. Academia is pervaded by so many policies, curricula, and textbooks evincing respect for cultural diversity that it scarcely needs illustration; characteristic is the “President’s Policy on Harassment” promulgated at my own institution, the University of Connecticut, which reads in part:

The University deplores behavior that denigrates others because of their race, ethnicity, ancestry, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental disabilities . . . All members of the University community are responsible for the maintenance of a social environment in which people are free to work and learn without fear of discrimination and abuse. (Hartley)

The exceptions are the aberrations. As teachers, we can and do acknowledge what students already know from their own experience—that there are innumerable other contexts where alternative dialects are appropriate. We can make those who speak the dominant language sensitive to the multiple codes, cultural referents, and dialects in the speech and writing of respected public figures and writers, such as Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Adrienne Rich, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Respect for the students’ right to their own language extends to not penalizing students for using it, even while they are also learning the dominant standard. Critical thinking can occur in any language.

Whether informed teachers, acting through professional organizations such as NCTE and CCC, will succeed in influencing current attempts to mandate national standards (and consequently, national testing) so they reflect the diverse plurality of actual practice nationwide remains to be seen. Is it utopian to strive to make public policy ethical as well as culturally responsive? Jacqueline Jones Royster, like other CCC and NCTE Chairs in recent years, argues that such transformations can and must be effected. In her address to the 1995 CCCC meeting, “When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own,” she says, “The challenge is to teach, to engage in research, to write, and to speak with Others with the determination to

operate not only with professional and personal integrity, but also with the specific knowledge that communities and their ancestors are watching,” setting “aside our rights to exclusivity in our home cultures” in the interests of sustaining “productivity” in the contact zones (33).

*My own writing is invested with the same values as my teaching. In aiming to delight as well as to teach, I will rewrite and rewrite and rewrite (parts of what you are reading have been written two dozen times, and more) to bring order and clean, well-lighted prose from a fragmented and chaotic universe of discourse. If these characteristics mean I am middle class, so be it; I'd call them manifestations of my professional concern for clarity, and of respect for my readers. When we moved into a house with an herb garden, I planned to keep each species within prim bounds. When I bought a capacious new desk, I vowed to keep it uncluttered. When I get—oh rapture—a real letter, I aim to answer it within a week. That the garden harbors volunteers and chipmunks, that my desk overflows with books and papers and stray computer discs, pretty weeds from the garden, and unanswered mail is a visual reminder that some middle-class priorities are more important than others in this mixture of chaos and order, confusion and certainty, the place where I live.*

## *Textual Terror, Textual Power: Teaching Literature Through Writing Literature*

### WHERE WE'VE BEEN: BACKGROUND AND THEORY

Revolutionary principles often look like common sense, especially from the familiar comfort of retrospect. In *Textual Power*, Robert Scholes offers the revolutionary, but highly common-sensical principle that the best way to understand a text is to produce a text in response to it: “Our job is not to produce ‘readings’ for our students, but to give them the tools for producing their own.” He amplifies, “Our job is *not* to intimidate students with our own superior textual production,” as high priests of literature brilliantly unlocking the “right” readings of poetry before classes of students awed by our interpretations, arcane and esoteric and oh-so-scholarly. We can and should introduce our students to “the codes upon which all textual production depends,” and then encourage them to write their own texts in response to the texts they read in a literature course, any literature course (24–25). Scholes is talking here about encouraging students to write independent criticism of literary works. Critical freedom can—and should—lead to creative freedom, as Scholes illustrates throughout his equally revolutionary common-sensical *Text Book*. Indeed, as I will argue and demonstrate in this chapter, why not encourage students to write creative texts in the genres and modes of the works they’re studying, in response to and as a way of understanding these works?

Scholes articulates in *Textual Power* and *Text Book* an admirable solution to a problem that has plagued me from my undergraduate days through decades as a writer, scholar, and teacher: how to help students combine the study of creative literature and the practice of creative writing. The literary critics and scholars who determine, by their own example, the normative, high-priest way we teach literature through critical *explications de texte*, have, by and large, relegated these activities to separate spheres. This arbitrary division has the same deleterious effects on critical understanding and critical writing that the racism and sexism of “separate

spheres” have had historically on the relations between blacks and whites, men and women.

Indeed, it has taken me years to be able to integrate the critical and the creative successfully in my literature classes. The climate is finally right. Nevertheless, because teaching and learning continue to be dynamic and reciprocal processes, what I say here about teaching literature through writing represents only the current state of a process of continual evolution. Consequently, much of my illustrative material will be drawn from a recent graduate course at the University of Connecticut in “Autobiography: Telling Secrets, Telling Lies, Telling Lives.” (For the students’ version, see chapter five.)

My own behavior as a scholar and writer anticipated Scholes by two decades. I decided that I needed to understand as an insider the issues I’d raised, as an arrogant outside explicator, in my critical dissertation on literary biography, “How Literary Biographers Use their Subjects’ Works.” So I spent seven years writing and publishing *Doctor Spock: Biography of a Conservative Radical*, as I explain in chapter eleven, “Coming of Age. . . .” I could not have learned except by writing a biography myself that this genre has not only a human face, but a human heart and soul “Growing Up with Dr. Spock”. When I first started teaching poetry, I wrote several hundred poems—and published some (see “Definition of Poetry,” xi)—to learn a better way to teach this individualistic, elusive genre.

But the logical next step—as a teacher who would enable and therefore empower students to do the same thing—took another fifteen years. Scholes had to articulate the theory. I had to publish creative nonfiction and personal criticism—and to do that, the critical climate had to change. In “Beyond Literary Darwinism,” Frey points out that the adversarial mode of criticism has dominated the most prestigious journal, *PMLA*, for at least the past twenty years. In “The Literary Argument and Its Discursive Conventions,” MacDonald demonstrates that such criticism is opaque, elitist, the unutterable inscribed by the unreadable—and the very antithesis of the clear, concise, accessible prose that writing teachers have been advocating during the same time that the Literary Darwinists have dominated professional meetings and journals.

Professional criticism created the prevailing model for how literature should be taught in the classroom, as well. Argumentative models of every sort, whether New Critical, Deconstructionist, or any other intellectual framework, have isolated the primary creative works from the very students eager to enjoy them, as Eudora Welty’s mother read Dickens, “in the spirit in which she would have eloped with him”(7). Instead, student writers are

required to adopt the critical models of their mentors, and to write adversarial literary criticism, becoming junior Literary Darwinists closing in for the kill. What sparks of creativity can survive in this critical jungle?

Until recently, there has been little journal space for mavericks such as William H. Gass, whose idiosyncratic wit enlivened the critical wilderness with such works as *The World Within the Word* and *Habitations of the Word*. Not until 1987 did Jane Tompkins's "Me and My Shadow" appear, followed in 1989 by Susan J. Leonard's precedent-shattering *PMLA* article, "Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster à la Riseholme, and Key Lime Pie." These and some other feminist theoretical works (see Frey) were harbingers of the far more comfortable climate of the 1990's, now receptive to such works as G. Douglas Atkins's *Estranging the Familiar: Toward a Revitalized Critical Writing*; Michael Kowalewski's collection, *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*; Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar's *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*; and Raymond Federman's playful *Critifiction: Postmodern Essays*.

In this climate I have finally found editorial encouragement to take the risk, and places to publish the creative nonfiction and the creative criticism that I always wanted to write, as is evidenced throughout *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*. If I can do it, I have the right to ask my students to do it too, because I have the credibility to show them how, as chapters one and five demonstrate. I also believe that I, and other graduate English faculty, have a particular obligation to teach the literature of creative writing in part through the practice of creative writing, including creative nonfiction. Our students themselves, primarily English M.A. and Ph.D. candidates, will become teachers of literature and, willy-nilly, of writing; they should take the plunge while the water's warming up.

#### WHERE WE ARE NOW: CLASSROOM APPLICATION

So in every course I've taught during the past decade I have been requiring students to try writing in one or more of the literary modes we're studying. By mid-semester in every literature course I teach, all students have to write at least one short paper *of* literature, rather than *about* literature, so that what they've learned about creative writing from the experience of trying it themselves will inform the rest of their semester's work. Of course, I really want this experience to inform their subsequent reading and teaching and to change the rest of their lives, but I don't confess this extraordinarily demanding—and daunting—goal at the outset. To encourage freedom and experimentation—and to allow the timid and the terrified to

do it at all—students can waive a grade on this paper, if they wish. To date, only one has done so.

The assignments vary depending on the course. In “Women Writers,” the students must write in one or another of the genres we study—poetry, creative nonfiction, fiction, or drama. In “Rhetorical Theory and Composition Research,” the students write a short paper of stylistic imitation, and another research paper in their own voice rather than in academic discourse. The host of possibilities in “Autobiography” is illustrated below. Initially, these assignments are startling to some, intimidating if not terrifying to others. Their vast, open universe forces students to look beyond the critical boundaries in which they have been comfortably, sometimes complacently, confined. By the time these students are in graduate school, they have become competent ventriloquists in the language of critical jargon, submerging their own voices in the process. They *know* how to write as critics, but many—often most—have never written in any of the literary genres they have been learning to dissect.

“Me? A poet? I’ve never been asked to write anything creative before,” worried Bethany Drews-Javidi, a doctoral student taking her last-course-before-prelims. “I’ve never written anything except in military language,” confessed Steve Ryan, a career army captain returning to grad school to prepare to teach English at West Point, his prose as ramrod-straight as his military bearing. “This is the toughest assignment I’ve ever had, to imitate another’s style,” but he grinned as he said it.

To be a producer as well as a consumer of texts enables—no, obliges—the writer to understand works of literature from the inside out. In poetry, for instance, nascent poets learn through experience and experimentation why lines scan the way they do, why line breaks come where they do, why certain words are used instead of others for alliteration or for rhyme. In autobiography, as Carol Virostek observed on returning to college to earn a doctorate after twenty-two years of high school teaching,

I began to see that one need not have all the answers about some life situation or conflict in order to write about it, that the writing could in fact become part of the resolution. I began to understand that writing about oneself need not be self-promotional or confessional (despite personal admissions) and that the events in the lives of ordinary people such as I and my classmates contain all the elements of drama one would expect to find only in the lives of the famous and infamous people [whose autobiographies] we’ve read.

Among the variety of obvious and more subtle aspects of imaginative writing that students learn from the experience of doing it, are the following, as I now tell all my classes. What follows is copied from my current

undergraduate “Advanced Composition” syllabus, though it could be from Anycourse:

Through the act(s) of writing and rewriting, I hope you’ll come to understand—among other things that writers know—

1. That a particular experience, common or unusual, can be rendered in innumerable versions, voices, modes.
2. That nominally personal writing can send numerous messages with social, political, cultural, ethical (and many other) implications.
3. That style is intimate kin to substance and to self.
4. That the unsaid—de—emphasis, omissions, gaps, erasures—is potentially as significant as what is said.
5. That dishonesty can destroy a piece, ethically and aesthetically.
6. That nothing is insignificant—every word, every syntactic structure, every punctuation mark—counts; the format as well as the form send a host of messages.
7. That critical rigor undergirds writing well. (“Write hot, edit cold.”)
8. That most writing benefits from rewriting, and rewriting, and rewriting. . . .
9. That it is important to read literature, as well as to write it, with an understanding of the writer’s craft, the writer’s art.

Writing literature to learn literature obliges and enables the students to become invested in their own writing, and in the writing of their peers, in ways they would never have imagined before they tried it. The students fret. They stew. They write and rewrite and rewrite again before they’re ready to share their work with me and with each other—also part of the requirement that I also impose on myself.

In every case, sooner or later, when the students have begun to understand what they’ve done, textual terror gives way to a sense of textual power. “Is this good enough to submit for publication?” asked Bethany, bestowing an elegant, laser-printed slender volume on each member of our “Women Writers” class. “Well, almost.” Steve’s account of his experience in a refugee camp during Operation Desert Storm did indeed prove to be a publishable example in a composition textbook:

The camp seems loudest at night. A huge, dulled murmur flows up from the valleys with hacking, rattling coughs, unending moaning like mantras, mules braying, wails, and shrieks as if a child stepped on a nail. Clank tap-tapping, metal pots clanking and wood chopping sounds, but no sounds of laughter. The footsteps and shifting of thousands make a pressure on the ear just below the level of a sound, and no strong wind whistles close distractions or carries the sounds away. Rising to the hill in the middle of 85,000 Kurdish refugees, the sounds articulate our mission (99).



The experience of writing these short assignments invariably influences the term papers. Some students in the Rhetorical Theory and the Women Writers courses decide to write their longer papers in the voices and modes with which they've been experimenting. I always allow this alternative, but do not require it, though I do insist on a clear, readable style—preferably one that is humanly engaging. “Autobiography” engenders the writing of creative nonfiction; reading and writing about others' life stories—a dozen published autobiographies of distinction accompanied by a dozen three-to-seven-page interpretive response papers—inspires the students to tell their own. Although I'd expected these students in a critically oriented graduate program to write critical term papers, seven of the ten chose the option to write autobiographical essays. As Carol Virostek summed up, “I will have plenty of opportunity to write critical papers in future courses. I couldn't let the opportunity to re-read my own life pass me by.”

I am a restless teacher. Just as I'm always pushing my own writing to make it better, and my students' work to make it publishable, I am always tinkering with my teaching<sup>1</sup>; even if something works well in the classroom, I want to make it better. Although for thirty-five years I have taught writing courses through workshops, not until five years ago did I do what now seems both obvious and inevitable—incorporate writing workshops into my literature course. To help students write their short autobiographical paper, it seemed logical to embed seventy-five-minute writing workshops into two of the two-and-a-half-hour class sessions. The first one, a preparation for the student writing, would come in the fifth week, a month before the paper's due date; in the follow-up we'd read and analyze student papers.<sup>2</sup>

The preliminary workshop would focus on prize-winning creative nonfiction written in other courses by two students in the class, and—with great trepidation—a draft of my own work-in-progress, “Growing Up with Doctor Spock.” Now I knew why, that although the critical and pedagogical climate had changed sufficiently during the past six years to allow me to share completed work with students, I had never dared to commit the ultimate act of collegial teaching.

Every word, every sentence, every segment of an autobiography of quality is a rendering of the truth that is at the deep heart's core of both imaginative literature and creative nonfiction. As Gertrude Stein says, “I write for myself and strangers.” But how would it be possible to write such profound, intimate truth for those former strangers, now students, whom I would have to see for the rest of the semester—or for much longer, as advisees, friends, and colleagues? How would I be able to maintain professorial authority when my students understood how vulnerable I—always upbeat

in classroom—still remained to the pain and exile, personal and professional, that were intertwined with my writing of Doctor Spock's biography? What if I cried in class as I cried every time I wrote and rewrote the tough parts? The workshop sessions, like the writing on which they focused, were to deal with the art of crafting an honest, engaging autobiography, not with confession for therapeutic purposes. It would have been much easier to spill my life to strangers on airplanes.

Nevertheless, I handed the class a draft of "Growing Up with Doctor Spock" a week in advance. And every day, because I was pushing a publisher's deadline as well as the course's, I slipped ever more condensed revisions of the most difficult material—my parents' anti-Semitic rejection of myself, my husband, our marriage, and ultimately of the Spock biography—into the students' mailboxes, three on the workshop day alone. The sharing of this work changed the dynamics of the course so dramatically that I now not only feel obliged to write this most crucial assignment every semester I require the students to do so, but also to offer it, revisions and all, for class critique in a workshop session.

Student evaluations are unanimous in identifying the pivotal importance of this workshop session. It quickly established a "writing community," said TA Jason Hunt, in which "the hierarchical boundaries, student/professor, student/canonical author seemed to disappear." Veteran middle-school teacher Jim Fuller debated whether to write about the recent death of his nine-month-old daughter, Hadley, until "Your example made me feel comfortable with opening my own life up to the class." He added that the workshop critique was also "an effective teaching device [that] said to us, 'There now, I did it and you can do it too.' The atmosphere changed after that class. You bridged the [arbitrary] division between the critical and the personal, the intellect and the emotions, [and enabled] us all to leap the divides constructed by years of habit."

Moreover, the stream of revisions had other, serendipitous effects. The students saw this exposure of the revising process, as TA Bob Myhal said, "most significant in establishing the link between teaching, writing, and studenting," because it was "more honest, more difficult, and more risky than bringing a published, and thus polished, piece of finished writing into a class." Jason took heart from the "constant revisions appearing in my box. . . . Even though I try to teach writing as a process, I still have to fight the suspicion that for published writers [writing] really isn't as hard as they'd have me believe. To see you struggling"—and publishing the results—"renewed my faith in the process. So we all, professor and students, struggled, and the [distinguished] papers that resulted underscored the value of our effort."

As I increased the pressure on myself as a teacher and as a writer, I did not intend to increase the pressure for excellence on my already hardworking students, but that was the effect. Space limitations allow quotations from only two of the intricate, elegant, tough long papers of both autobiography and criticism that this class wrote, and rewrote, and rewrote—to the point where they are, I believe, worthy of publication and prizes. All of the papers, irrespective of subject, represented a witnessing of powerful life events that in their literate rendering became life-affirming: birth and death, coming of age, coming out, living as a stranger in a strange land, building a house and building a marriage, moving from suicide to an affirmation of life.

Indeed, Elizabeth Bidinger, a professional editor with an M.F.A. in creative writing, titled her paper “Witness.” Whereas in her earlier fiction courses Elizabeth had written with comic detachment about her family uncomfortably transplanted from Appalachia to Michigan, her new understanding of autobiography enabled her to interpret the same people, comic and pathetic, with bittersweet compassion. In “Witness,” she depicts her family’s complicated disintegration on the Christmas eve of her thirteenth year. Into their house walked

a thin young woman I’d never seen before. . . . I noticed that not only was she pigeon-toed, but she had a wandering eye, too. . . . She was our dad’s girlfriend, the one he kept threatening to marry as soon as he could afford to, even though he still lived at home with us. . . . I had sworn to my mother that I would kill Debbie when I had the chance. Because of her, my mother had virtually stopped living, and had nearly starved herself to death. But here Debbie was, right before me in our very family room, and I was not killing her, but hoping that she would like me. . . .

“Thank you for coming here,” my mom said to her. “Why don’t you tell the girls everything you’ve told me over the phone.” . . .

“I shouldn’t be here,” [Debbie] said. “I have no business being here. Jim lied to me is all, he told me a bunch of lies.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Angela [Elizabeth’s fifteen-year-old sister] said. “I’m leaving.” My mother yanked her back by the elbow.

“No,” my mother said coolly, “You girls are staying. I want you to witness all of this. You’re going to witness.”

She turned to my father’s girlfriend. “Let me see those papers . . . “Here,” she said, handing them over. . . . [My mother] offered the papers to me. “Witness,” she said.

I had never seen divorce papers in my life . . . but instantly I could see what stupid fakes these were. They were horribly typed on Angela’s erasable paper, with letters out of line and ink smears and a clearly unofficial style. The top

sheet identified my dad as a U.S. naval pilot. Far from the truth: he drove a bulldozer at a gravel pit. It said that he had divorced Sharon last year. Also not true. It said that he had no children.

The ensuing class discussion reaffirmed Elizabeth's view that "Doing the personal writing for the class helped me to see that my [own] family history is rich and valuable, rather than something to be ashamed of and to disguise; this . . . is a significant step in my growth as a person and as a writer. . . . This course revived my spirit. I am not overstating it when I say that the class reminded me of how deeply I love literature and writing and scholarship and even life." Indeed, Elizabeth's paper, like those of her colleagues in class, demonstrates that she had learned the major literary lesson of this course, that through writing, controlled in persona, tone, and detail, she could gain the psychological and aesthetic distance that enabled her to translate life into art. This writing is by no means objective, nor (McGinty's objections to autobiographical student writing notwithstanding) can it be, but it has achieved both insight and rhetorical finesse through a writing process similar to sanding down a piece of beautiful wood, layer by layer, then painstakingly rubbing it to bring up the grain.

Jim Fuller's paper, "A Twist of Fate," bore a more painful witness. He juxtaposed sections of the ever-more-somber account of his daughter's inexorable death from spinal muscular atrophy (a fatal form of MS)—"she was by far our happiest baby. That she couldn't crawl or turn over didn't frustrate her. She had a perfect disposition for her disease"—with ironically hilarious vignettes of the death-defying exploits of his robust four-year-old twins and their brother whose "room at home," stockpiled with toy rifles and pirate swords, "already had that quaint early-armory look so popular with today's six-year-olds. . . . I had the eerie feeling that I might be raising a mercenary." Through this comic enjambment of the normal against the abnormal, Jim manages the difficult feat of not succumbing to self-pity or sentimentality. Indeed, his affirmation of life resonates through his daughter's death; he concludes:

As a teacher, I live for the echo, knowing that if I work hard, some part of me will echo through the adolescents I spend my days with, just as I know that I myself am an echo of the compassion and enthusiasm of my best teachers. Hadley has changed me. My work, my life will now be an echo of her.

This was the one session where, as a class, our emotional response was so powerful that it had the potential for interfering with critical commentary—always a danger in such courses, but here kept in check by the theoretical and critical commentary on the genre that the students read through the semester.

Elizabeth Bidinger spoke for the class in responding to her classmate's work, read during our final class session of collaborative reading, writing, and eating:

I was simultaneously aware, while listening to the painful details of her death, that the bereaved father has created an intimate record of the event that is so beautiful in its telling that it makes his listeners love life. It is a death-defying act, magical in its refraction of the pain from a man's worst possible loss into a piece of writing that has the spark of life in itself. . . . Writing autobiography has heightened my awareness as a critic, which in turn has deepened my appreciation of how generous and meaningful a gift a fine autobiographical piece can be.

#### NOTES

1. As a consequence I have revised this chapter of *Composition Studies as a Creative Art* extensively, even though it was originally published less than two years ago.
2. Actually, there were two follow-up workshop sessions. Three students had written papers that tiptoed genteelly around the edges of their subjects, such as a sweet, conventional commemoration of the peaceful death of the author's aged father. ("A very nice tribute," I commented on it.) In concentrating on the more distinctive hard-edged papers, there wasn't time during the first session to discuss the writings that pulled their punches. The next week I "forgot" to present these papers to the class; spontaneous revisions were appearing in my mailbox. By the third week the revisions reflected stunning changes in the writers, as well as in their work. As the author of the originally sentimental eulogy said, "The long-term effect of this class is my firm, undying resolution never ever to write anything 'nice' again!"

## *American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre*

*EVERY DAY, YEAR ROUND, I SWIM LAPS AT THE UNIVERSITY POOL. SEVEN* years ago, when I was new to the campus, all the bodies were blurred, streaked figures in or out of water.

That the personal is political is never truer than in relation to autobiography. American autobiography, what we write, read, teach, study, and critique, is inseparably intertwined with political concerns. Indeed, autobiography has throughout our national history been a conspicuously political genre. Political concerns strongly influence who writes (or tells) their stories, the themes and masterplots of these stories. Politics influence which works are published and circulated, which are canonized, and consequently, which are read and studied in the schools. The last section of this paper will deal with issues of teaching autobiography in literature and in composition courses.

*I try to avert my glance, but it is hard to ignore the presence of people who share the shower day after day, naked.*

### DEFINITIONS

But first, because autobiography is even today, at the height of popular and critical interest, a contested genre, slippery and protean, definitions are in order. In the old days, before 1970, autobiography was defined as the true story of a person's whole life, artistically shaped as the result "of an interpenetration and collusion of inner and outer life, of the person and society" (Pascal 185). There was no debate, no disagreement; readers knew an autobiography when they saw one—most likely, the public life of a Great

White Older Man—statesman, military leader, or self-made man in the mold of Benjamin Franklin. Critics paid scant attention to the genre, and except for canonical works by Augustine, Franklin, Henry Adams (and occasionally that rascal, Rousseau), the subject was seldom taught at any level in the American educational system.

But, by 1980, the universe of American autobiography had changed, utterly. The definition of autobiography has changed, and changed again, to encompass the multiple and diverse variations of the genre—many in existence from the settlement of the country. These include not only partial as well as full-length self-portraits, but diaries, collections of letters, oral histories, personal essays, childhoods, spiritual autobiographies, confessions, and hybrid forms—dual portraits; family or group histories (combining biography and autobiography, as in Pauli Murray's *Proud Shoes*); personal travel narratives; and blends of fiction, myth, and personal narrative (as in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*). We could also add films, videotapes; and political, legal, ethnographic, educational, critical, or other treatises in which the author's personal narrative is embedded, such as Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* or Patricia Williams's *An Alchemy of Race and Rights*.

Despite this diversity of form, critics and common readers alike agree on two central points of definition: that the autobiography's author, the story's narrator, and "the character who is being talked about" all have the same name (Lejeune 12); and that the autobiographer is (or purports to be) telling the truth (see Bruss 10–11), rhetorical and aesthetic strategies that combine "tell it slant" notwithstanding (see Andrews 2–3).

#### WHY IS AUTOBIOGRAPHY SO PROMINENT NOW?

*I silently compare my body to theirs. Fatter than me. Thinner. Breasts bigger than mine, they could scarcely be smaller. Is she pregnant, or just flabby? Older than me. Younger. The spraying water makes us innocent, washing away makeup, hairdos, neutralizing skin color. Only the tatoos remain—a discreet butterfly poised on an ankle. A rosebud amidst cleavage. Numbers ragged on a forearm, indelible. And scars.*

Since 1980, in the space of about a decade, this most democratic and diverse of literary genres moved from the margin to the mainstream, where it remains to this day. Autobiographical literature of all sorts is read, discussed, and taught across the educational spectrum, from classes in beginning literacy to graduate seminars in the genre. There is a literary theory to accommodate whatever textual politics the critic or teacher wants to

employ, for autobiography—much closer in form and technique to fiction than to biography—is hospitable to diverse schools of contemporary criticism: postmodern, poststructuralist, reader-response, rhetorical (whether Bakhtinian, feminist, deconstructionist, social constructionist, or other). Between 1950 and 1970, only nine books on autobiography as a genre were published in English, not including book-length studies of individual works or authors. Since the publication in 1972 of Olney's conceptually revolutionary *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*, there has been a 2500% increase in critical books alone—nearly 250 in English, as well as innumerable articles. Between 1970–74 and 1985–89 the number of critical articles on the twenty-one most frequently studied autobiographers cited in the *MLA Bibliography* had risen from 100 to 382, a nearly 400% increase (Bloom and Yu 183). Since 1991 MLA has had a Division of Life Writing; entire journals are devoted to *Biography* (b. 1981) and *Auto/Biography* (b. 1985) and *Creative Nonfiction* (b. 1993), all of which encompass autobiography. Moreover, numerous articles on this versatile genre appear in a wide range of other publications.

A major reason for the current prominence of autobiography is the legitimation of the genre by the impact of various contemporary political and social movements that gave power and voice to people previously suppressed or subdued in the dominant white male culture: women, African-Americans, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, recent immigrants, gays, and people with disabilities. Gertrude Stein says at the beginning of *Everybody's Autobiography*, "Alice [B. Toklas] did hers and now everybody will do theirs" (3). In this most democratic of genres, even people who can't write can tell their life stories through collaboration with an oral historian or a co-author.

The stories they tell, by and large, have comic (in the cosmic sense) masterplots that validate the movements that enabled them to speak—testaments to endurance, survival, triumphs over adversity. The parallel white and black exemplary lives of Benjamin Franklin and Frederick Douglass are cases in point, providing, as Bercovitch observes of Franklin's *Autobiography*, "the pattern American,' both for 'a rising people' and (later) for the entire genre of the American success story" (141). Such works chart and indeed celebrate the protagonists' movement from bondage to freedom, outcasts to insiders, rags to riches, powerlessness to power—including the power of the self-presentation that manifests these triumphs. Although life isn't necessarily fair—Andre Dubus will never again walk, Stanley Elkin and Nancy Mairs will continue to deteriorate from MS, Zora Neale Hurston will die penniless and forgotten—autobiography can right the balance.



Works such as *Broken Vessels*, *Pieces of Soap*, *Ordinary Time*, and *Dust Tracks on a Road* represent the existential triumph of art over existence, endowing even the most difficult and problematic lives with significance.

The newly acknowledged value of these works, diverse in mode and authorship, has contributed to the explosion of the literary and critical canon, as well: Franklin, Adams, Thoreau, and Augustine now share the critical shelf with Stein, Kingston, Douglass, Jacobs, and Rodriguez. Barbara Herrnstein Smith explains that all canonical texts reflect “contingencies of value,” i.e. that all evaluations of literary texts are actually reflections of how well any particular work satisfies the ever-changing needs (the implied criteria) of the individual and society (52).

Indeed, from 1970 to 1990 critical interest in women’s autobiography expanded elevenfold, dropping the man: woman ratio from 9:1 in 1970 to 2:1 in 1990 and changing the canon to include, in addition to Stein and Nin among the top 20 in 1970, Kingston, Angelou, Hellman, Dillard, Antin, Jacobs, and Hurston in 1990. During the same period critical attention to minorities and people of underclass origins (Wright, Kingston, Angelou, Antin, Hurston, Black Elk, Malcolm X) increased by 40% (Bloom and Yu 154–57). These works are widely taught, not only in literature classes, but in courses in history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, women’s studies, African-American studies, and a host of other disciplines.

Contemporary political and social movements have also created a revolution in the way we study our culture—for example, our history, our society, and our literature. History no longer has a top-down, kings-and-battles focus; society is not just plantation owners and Captains of Industry; the literary canon has expanded widely beyond its elitist orientation. These disciplines, among others, are now eclectic in philosophy, choice of subject, and research methodology. An abundance of primary autobiographical documents written by common, as well as uncommon, women and men, minorities and majorities offer compelling views from the grassroots. Three examples among many possibilities illustrate this point. “The Female World of Love and Ritual” (1975) is Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s landmark study of nineteenth century women’s “long-lived, intimate, loving friendships,” derived from an analysis of the “correspondence and diaries” of 35 ordinary American middle-class families (54–55). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (1988) draws extensively on collections of Southern family papers—authors’ commentaries on their own works, account books, and especially letters, diaries (notably Mary Chesnut’s), and autobiographies (notably Harriet Jacobs’s). Annette

Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975) uses comparable documents to dispute and reinterpret Henry Nash Smith's analysis of the American West in *Virgin Land* (1950).

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A GENRE OF POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

*We move in concert when the toilets are flushed in the adjacent room, dance or be scalded. Gradually, we begin to talk, under the streaming water. Where to get good maple syrup. Sightings of bluebirds, coyotes, a red fox. Peace Corps work in the Peruvian Andes. RN training in hospitals vs college nursing programs. When to plant tomatoes so they won't freeze.*

In one sense every autobiography, marginal or mainstream, could be considered a statement of individual politics, for its subject embodies the argument that Joan Didion says all writers make, "listen to me, see it my way, change your mind." Autobiography has remained a perennially popular genre among common readers, in part because it lets them look at life through others' eyes, providing a host of vicarious experiences, and models to marvel at, if not to emulate, as is evident in the bestselling *Lives* of the repentant, the rascalious, and the rich.

Yet entire categories of autobiography have always had political agendas; these works aim not just to affect the individual reader, but to revolutionize society. Every political autobiography is a form of witnessing, as Elie Wiesel explains in "Why I Write." Every political autobiography uses the "power of the word" not only to convey the profundity of human experience but to move readers to action. "Not to transmit an experience," says Wiesel, talking of the life and death of the Holocaust, "is to betray it" (41). A disproportionate number of political autobiographies place the subject in what Mary Louise Pratt calls "contact zones," "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths" (34).

In our country's history, the most conspicuous examples of such manifestly political autobiographies are captivity narratives and slave narratives. All use personal stories to promote political ends, allegedly in the national or regional interest, which may or may not be in the subject's best interest. Such narratives are never unmediated works; oral historians, ethnographers, or other amanuenses (since many of the subjects couldn't write), translators, editors, and publishers all serve as gatekeepers, permitting as well as denying the subject access to an audience—and on their terms, rather than the subject's. As Andrews has observed of the "large number of

dictated, edited, and ghostwritten narratives that appeared under the ostensible authorship of blacks,” 1760–1865, “Editors . . . assumed the right to do everything to a dictation from ‘improving’ its grammar, style, and diction, to selecting, arranging, and assigning significance to its factual substance” (20)—exactly what literate authors, such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs could do for themselves.

Thus the title page of the first (1861) edition of Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* bears a political message: Northerners “have no conception of the depth of *degradation* involved in that word, SLAVERY; if they had, they would never cease their efforts until so horrible a system was overthrown.” As Harris has observed, in Mary Rowlandson’s *The Sovereignty and Goodness of GOD, Together With the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Resturation of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682), “one woman’s trauma-ridden experience of captivity became an icon of national ideology.” Rowlandson’s depictions of the Native Americans as “barbarians,” “savages” who inhabited Satan’s domain, fueled the colonists’ arguments that “the removal of the Algonkians and other native tribes” from regions where the whites wanted to settle “was in the ‘national’ interest” (340, 42). Space does not permit elaboration here on the fact that not only slave narratives, but African-American autobiographies of any era, are documents of social protest and social critique, from Olaudah Equiano (1789) to Frederick Douglass (1845, 1855, 1888, 1892) to W.E.B. Du Bois (1940, 1952, 1968), Zora Neale Hurston (1942), Richard Wright (1945), Malcolm X (1963), Mamie Fields (1983), and Pauli Murray (1987).

#### THE POLITICS OF TEACHING AUTOBIOGRAPHY

*Sometimes we talk now when we swim laps, with pauses for the turns. The Met’s pre-Impressionism show (“Don’t go”). Disseration research—astrophysics, patiently explained, but most of us still don’t understand. How children can learn three foreign languages simultaneously, with impeccable accents, and never mix them up. Problems closer to home. Day care, policies and possibilities. Health care, ditto. Helping aged parents live, and die, with dignity. I tell people whose names I do not know things I have never told my own sister.*

The personal is compellingly political. Readers of all races must applaud Frederick Douglass’s declaration of freedom, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man,” as he fights his cruel overseer, wins, and experiences “a glorious resurrection, from the tomb

of slavery to the heaven of freedom” (*Narrative* 75, 81). Whether monocultural, bicultural, or multicultural, readers must share Maxine Hong Kingston’s painful introduction to American kindergarten, where because she spoke only Chinese, she couldn’t say anything in English, “spoke to no one at school. . . and flunked kindergarten” (*Woman Warrior* 192). However patriotic, however sympathetic to federal policies, readers must sympathize with Sioux Zitkala-Sa’s critique of the white practice of sending Native American children away from their families to white boarding schools: “I was . . . neither a wild Indian nor a tame one . . . among a cold race whose hearts were frozen hard with prejudice” (*School Days* 93). No matter what their health or linguistic preferences, readers must applaud Nancy Mairs’s feisty decision to label herself, a MS victim, as a “cripple . . . one to whom the fates/gods/viruses have not been kind, but who can face the brutal truth of her existence squarely. As a cripple, I swagger” (9). And so on.

*Teaching autobiography in literature courses.* The expanded literary canon has expanded the teaching canon as well. Autobiography is a natural subject for curricula designed to include women, minorities, people of diverse cultures, and other previously marginalized people. Because autobiography is so diverse and eclectic, a literature curriculum that incorporates it can be fine-tuned to emphasize whatever agenda(s) the teacher, institution, or system desires—with (despite the insistence of the other Blooms—Allan and Harold—and E.D. Hirsch on the superior quality of the traditional canon) no diminution of quality. Specialized genre courses can, and do, focus on particular aspects of autobiography. These include: the historical or generic survey (say, from Augustine’s *Confessions* to Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*); works of a particular culture or region (Asian-Americans, the American West or South); explorations of a significant stage in one’s life (childhood—e.g. Frank Conroy’s *Stop-Time*), or development as a writer or other professional—such as Eudora Welty’s *One Writer’s Beginnings*; works emphasizing a journey (physical or psychological, crisis, or watershed—Jill Ker Conway’s *The Road from Coorain*; Paul Monette’s *Becoming a Man*); and a host of other possibilities.

However, students are more likely to encounter autobiography-by-anthology in literature survey courses. The widely used *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, for instance, was a leader in remapping the landscape of American literature to include numerous autobiographical works: from literature of exploration (Christopher Columbus to Samuel Purchas) to literature of American selfhood, including excerpts from the autobiographies of Booker T. Washington, Zitkala-Sa, Mary Chesnut, Mary Antin, N. Scott Momaday, and Aurora Levins Morales. Paul Lauter’s preface to the first

edition (1990, reprinted in the second edition of 1994) articulates as its editorial principles all of the reasons I've given above for the current prominence of autobiography in American culture (I, xxxiii–xxxviii), which he summarizes in “Reconstructing American Literature”: “Many of today’s [college] courses regularly use more diaries, letters, and other ‘discontinuous’ forms than traditional curricula might, and they probably make greater use of autobiographical writing, at least by minority writers and white women. In part, such curricular broadening is a consequence of new feminist and minority scholarship” (111).

*Teaching autobiography in freshman composition.* Freshman Composition, in many schools the only course required of all undergraduates, is the site of numerous agendas, social, political, cultural, intellectual, acknowledged, and unacknowledged. Freshman composition has, among other tasks of socialization, initiation, and indoctrination, the job of making first year students aware of their college’s prevailing political philosophy (see chapter two). This is often accomplished by requiring the students to read anthologies of essays on contemporary topics, to which they respond with essays of their own. It would be hard—perhaps impossible—today to find a commercially published anthology that does not give equal representation to women, men, and writers of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and class backgrounds.

Much of the writing in these Readers is autobiographical—personal essays or chapters of autobiographies—elegant, eloquent testaments of both personal witness and social reform. The canon of familiar essays by Henry Thoreau, George Orwell, E.B. White, Joan Didion, James Baldwin, and Mary McCarthy is now expanded by equally canonical pieces by autobiographers Frederick Douglass, Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Rodriguez, Alice Walker, and N. Scott Momaday. And it is augmented by personal essays of Gary Soto, Amy Tan, Linda Hogan, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Nancy Mairs, Scott Russell Sanders, and the late Jeffery Schmalz.

The teaching of such autobiographical writings, like other texts, is amenable to a variety of prevailing literary theories and pedagogical philosophies. These range from expressivism (Murray 1985), to feminism (see Flynn & Schweickhart, Gannett, S. Miller), to social-constructivism (Bruffee, Berlin 1988), to Freire’s liberatory pedagogy translated into such works as different as Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers*, Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary*, Spellmeyer’s *Common Ground*, and Scholes’s *Textual Power and Text Book*, which theorize and demonstrate how students can construct texts of their own to respond to the texts they read.

It is very risky for a student in such a course not to follow the party line. For example, only the very brave or the very foolhardy freshman would

dare to write a paper responding to such autobiographers that took a stance that the teacher (representing “society”) would find politically (or morally) insensitive. In “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone,” Richard Miller identifies such writings as “parodic, critical, oppositional, dismissive, resistant, transgressive, [or] regressive” (394), and explains why most teachers can’t cope with them (see chapter three, “Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise”).

Yet it is also difficult for most freshmen to write personal essays as complicated and thoughtful as those of the very autobiographers whose essays they are reading. This is not because freshmen are incapable of such meaningful writing, but because they are too often discouraged from attempting it. Yet as DiPardo and Behar argue, personal writing requires the same tough-minded analytic capability that academic discourse involves; it is only that the personal-sounding writer appears to be cruising on overdrive instead of grinding gears on the uphill climb. Students can as readily learn how to read and think critically and to understand a variety of discourse communities from reading and analyzing autobiographies as any other kinds of literary texts.

Nevertheless, too many composition teachers enforce a double standard. Although they expect students to read and discuss autobiographical writing that is highly sophisticated and complex in both thought and style, teachers too often have minimal expectations of the students’ capability to produce meaningful autobiographical writing of their own (see S. Freedman, Helmers). Whatever knowledge of the genre these teachers have as critics of autobiography disappears in the composition classroom where, despite the many possibilities of autobiographical forms and subjects, such teachers equate student autobiographical writing with simplistic personal narrative. Student writing becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the token personal narrative marches along chronologically to the point of some fairly obvious discovery: “I used to be ashamed and embarrassed to be an [African-American/Asian/Hispanic/Native American], but now I’m so glad that I’m different.”

Such essays are often assigned as warmup exercises at the beginning of the semester, to allow the students to write on something they know before they tackle the really difficult writing that requires “critical thinking,” sparked by the clash of text against text, or—that pinnacle of accomplishment—literary criticism (see McQuade). Just as teachers have an incentive for giving this seemingly safe assignment, students have incentives for keeping their writing safe and bland; why should they take risks by trying tough writing on tough subjects, exposing their vulnerabilities to a teacher

or classmates they scarcely know, when writing about someone—themselves—whose identity they may be uncertain of as well?

To conceive of autobiographical writing in such a reductive way is to ignore the intellectual excitement and critical potential of the genre. Composition teachers value and reward literary criticism because that's the way they were trained to write and that's what they know how to do. They consider themselves successful if they've produced a class of competent critical clones. But this perspective ignores what serious writers of autobiography—or any personal writing—understand from the moment they shift from “one” to “I,” the highly constructed nature of the autobiographical persona (as my own varied autobiographical writings demonstrate throughout this book). In addition to being theoretically sophisticated readers, many other composition teachers are experienced writers, of poetry, fiction, belletristic essays, autobiographical literary criticism (see Bishop; Bishop and Ostrom; Bly; Freedman, Frey, and Zauhar; Tompkins 1987, 1996; Davidson; Torogovnick 1994). Such teachers are well-positioned to give autobiographical writing assignments that will enable their students to learn the careful control of tone, structure, persona, and syntax that govern good writing of any sort.

Other teachers remain trapped by the personal equation they persist in making between the student writer and the first-person character in the paper. In “Judging Writing, Judging Selves,” Faigley addresses this issue. Here he analyses forty-eight student essays in Coles and Vopat's *What Makes Writing Good?*, and the reasons their teachers—a range of theorists, empirical researchers, technical writing teachers, linguists, and practicing writers—gave for identifying the papers as “excellent.” The range of contributors, he notes with dismay, “is not matched by a similar range of student writing,” for most of the papers are “personal experience essays,” embedding “autobiographical narratives” and other forms of “writing about the writer.” Faigley rightly calls into question the teachers' assumptions that “autobiographical writing is more ‘truthful’ than nonautobiographical writing,” that “individuals possess an identifiable ‘true’ self,” and that the true self can be expressed in discourse’ (404–5). “Those who encourage ‘authentic voices’ in student writing often speak of giving students ‘ownership’ of a text or ‘empowering’ students,” says Faigley. “The former conflates the capitalist notion of property rights. . . with autobiographical writing,” and the latter “avoids the question of how exactly teachers are to give students power.” Faigley concludes with his most telling point, “The freedom students are given in some classes to choose and adapt autobiographical assignments hides the fact that these same students will

be judged by the teachers' unstated cultural definitions of the self." His solution is, in fact, implicit throughout this chapter on the political factors that influence the way writers construct autobiographies and readers read them. "We can, says Faigley, teach our students to analyze cultural definitions of the self, to understand how historically these definitions are created in discourse, and to recognize how definitions of the self are involved in the configuration of relations of power" (410–11).

Even as teachers consider honesty an important element in student (or any) writing, we need to be aware that what we are responding to may be, in essence, a compelling, personal sounding voice or a narrative persona that corresponds to our own socially constructed definitions of what particular students ought to be and how they ought to sound. If we teachers are essentially evaluating the manifestations of our own stereotypical, culture-bound values that we seek in our students' writing, then their work is in danger of becoming an overdetermined enterprise rather than an independent work. (However, to a large extent, this danger exists with student writing of any kind, as I point out in chapter three.) As Ruth Behar asserts in "Bringing the personal into scholarship," "Writing personally takes as much skill and willingness to follow through on all the nuances of a complicated idea as does writing impersonally. To assert that one is a . . . 'black gay man' or a 'working-class Latina' within one's study, say, of Shakespeare . . . is interesting only if one is able to draw deeper connections between one's personal experience and the subject under study." To do this requires not a full-length autobiography but "a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives. . . the topic being studied" (B2).

In brief, through writing autobiography (or other forms of belletristic personal essays) composition teachers can teach their students how hard it is to write well—and how exhilarating. Because, as Behar notes, "personal writing represents a sustained effort to democratize the academy," teachers and students alike can experience the power that comes from treating a meaningful subject, "in plain language that will be understood by a large audience . . . [and] that resonates more than jargon-laden analyses do with readers" (Behar B2). It is not sentimentality but a desire to engage understanding at "the deep heart's core" that leads teachers and their students who become writers to lay their lives on the line.

*A Mexican linguist lends me literature on good places to learn Spanish, "But it's really easy anywhere with an interactive computer program." A fiber artist designs and makes me the perfect dress, simple, comfortable, distinctive—"I've*



*never done this for anyone before.” I give another swimmer, a Thai microbiologist who moonlights as a caterer, copies of my books. We share recipes. We will cook together soon, in her house and mine. The community we have negotiated, interpreted, is the community we have become.*



PART II

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*Teaching and Writing  
Creative Nonfiction*



## *Teaching College English as a Woman*

### PROLOGUE

*D*uring my first year of doctoral work I spent all my savings on a lifetime membership in NCTE. Already, in my first year as a TA, I knew I loved to teach. Nothing less than a lifetime commitment to the profession I was preparing to join could express that love.

It has taken thirty years to find the voice, the place in the profession, to tell the stories that follow. When the events occurred, I would never discuss them, silenced by guilt, shame, anger, and embarrassment. Like discussing childbirth (which for the same reasons I never did either until a recent reunion with college roommates), it would not have been ladylike. But two years ago at a summer conference, a one-hour session on “gender and teaching,” attended by women and men alike, metamorphosed into two nights of telling life-saving stories.<sup>1</sup> And so I tell you what it has been like to teach college English as a woman, to become a member of the profession I now and ever embrace anew. Call me Lynn.

### I. MY JOB AS VENTRILOQUIST’S DUMMY

Once upon a time, as a newly minted Ph.D. with a newly minted baby, I got the best part-time job I’ve ever had, a half-time assistant professorship at a distinguished Midwestern university. Unusual for the early 60s, and unique to that institution, my job was created in response to the dean’s estimate of an impending shortage of faculty. “It’s going to be hell on wheels faculty-wise around here for the next five years,” he said. So I was hired for exactly half of a full-time job: half the teaching load, half the advising and committee work, half the regular benefits. Our second child was born, conveniently, during my second summer vacation. Though not on a tenure track, I did have a parking space; it seemed a fair exchange. I taught freshman composition, of course, and sometimes sophomore lit surveys. I even taught in a room that overlooked the playground of our children’s nursery school.

During the whole five years I taught there, I never expressed an original opinion about literature, either in class or out. In the course of my very fine

education at one of our nation's very finest universities, taught entirely by men except for women's phys. ed. where they allowed a woman to teach us how to develop graceful "posture, figure, and carriage," I learned, among other things, that only real professors had the right to say what they thought. Anyway, in the 50s there were no concepts, no language to say what I, as a nascent feminist critic, wanted to say. I tried, in a fifteen-page junior-year honors paper, "Milton's Eve did too have some redeeming virtues." The paper was returned, next day, in virgin condition, save a small mark in the margin on page two where the professor had apparently stopped reading, and a tiny scarlet C discreetly tattooed at the end. In shame and horror at getting less than my usual A, I went to see the professor. "Why did I get a C?" I was near tears. "Because," he said in measured tones, drawing on his pipe, "you simply can't say that." End of discussion. I did not sin again.

I had majored in English because I loved to read and to write, and I continued to love reading and writing all the way through graduate school. But somewhere along the line, perhaps through the examples of my professors, measured, judicious, self-controlled, I had come to believe that my job as a teacher was to present the material in a neutral manner, even-handedly citing a range of Prominent Male Critics, and let the students make up their own minds. It would have been embarrassing, unprofessional, to express the passion I felt, so I taught every class in my ventriloquist's dummy voice. Indifferent student evaluations reflected the disengagement this approach provoked—"although she's a nice lady," some students added.

Editing textbooks didn't count. Only the other women who taught freshman composition part-time took this work seriously. (Collectively we were known to the male full-time faculty as the "Heights Housewives," as we learned from the captions on the witchlike cartoons that would occasionally appear on the bulletin board in the English Department office.) I had collaboratively edited a collection of critical essays on Faulkner intended for freshman writing courses, signing the book contract in the hospital the day after the birth of my first child. I was working on two other collaborative texts. The English Department invited my Faulkner collaborator, a gracious scholar of international renown, to come to campus to lecture on the subject of our book, but they did not invite me to either the lecture or the dinner for him. The university's public relations spokesman nevertheless called and asked if I'd be willing to give a cocktail party for him, at my expense. That may have been the only time I ever said "no" during the whole five years I taught there.

Freshman composition didn't count. I was so apprehensive about publishing original writing in my own name that when my husband, Martin, a

social psychologist, and I collaborated on an article about a student's writing process, I insisted that we submit it in Martin's name only. Only real professors with full-time jobs could publish academic articles, and I knew I wasn't one. *College English* accepted it by return mail. "Now do you want your name on it?" Martin asked, "you should be first author." "Yes," I said, "Yes" (L. Bloom and M. Bloom).

My work in nonfiction didn't count. I proudly told the department chair that I was beginning research on a biography of Dr. Benjamin Spock, soon to retire from his faculty position at the same university. I had access to all the primary sources I needed, including Spock himself. "Why don't you write a series of biographical articles on major literary figures?" asked our leader, whose customary advice to faculty requests for raises was "Diversify your portfolio." "Once you've established your reputation you can afford to throw it away by writing about a popular figure." I thanked him politely and continued my research, a logical extension of my dissertation study of biographical method. I could learn a lot about how people wrote biographies, I reasoned, if I wrote one myself. And because I couldn't say to the children, "Go away, don't bother me, I'm writing about Doctor Spock," I learned to write with them in the room (see chapter eleven).

Ultimately, I didn't count either. A new department chairman arrived soon after I began the biography. His first official act, prior to making a concerted but unsuccessful effort to abolish Freshman English, was to fire all the part-time faculty, everyone (except TAs) who taught the lowly subject. All women but one. He told me privately, in person; a doctorate, after all, has some privileges, though my office mate learned of her status when the chairman showed a job candidate the office, announcing "This will be vacant next year." He was kind enough to write me a letter of recommendation, a single sentence that said, "Mrs. Bloom would be a good teacher of freshman composition." I actually submitted that letter along with a job application. Once.

## II. ON THE FLOOR WITH THE KITTY LITTER

One of the textbooks so scorned during my first part-time job actually got me my first full-time job, two years later. The department had adopted it for the freshman honors course, and the chair had written an enthusiastic review. Then, dear reader, he hired me! This welcoming work enabled me to find my voice. After ten years of part-time teaching, as bland as vanilla pudding, I felt free to spice up the menu. Being a full-time faculty member gave me the freedom to express my opinions about what we read and wrote, and to argue and joke with my students. My classes became noisy,

personal, and fun. Two years later, I received tenure, promotion, and an award for good teaching. But after four years in Indiana, my husband was offered a job in St. Louis too good to turn down. I resigned to move.

My voice was reduced to a whisper. I could find no full-time job in St. Louis in that inhospitable year of 1974 when there were several hundred applicants for every job. In hopes of ingratiating myself with one or another of the local universities, I taught part-time at three, marginal combinations of writing and women's studies. I taught early in the morning, in mid-afternoon, at night, coming and going under cover of lightness and darkness. It didn't matter, for no one except my students knew I was there anyway. Department chairmen wouldn't see me; with insulated indifference, faculty—even some I'd known in graduate school—walked past my invisible self in the halls. For administrative convenience, I was paid once a semester, after Thanksgiving, \$400. Fringe benefits, retirement, the possibility of raises or continuity of employment were nonexistent. At none of the three schools did I have any stationery, mailing privileges, secretarial help, telephone, or other amenities—not even an ID or a library card. I was treated as an illegal alien. Nowhere did I have an office, until I finally begged for one at the plushiest school, frustrated and embarrassed at having to confer with my students in the halls on the run. After several weeks, the word trickled down that I could share space with a TA—and, as it turned out, her cat, which she kept confined there. This office symbolized my status on all three jobs. It was in a building across campus from the English Department, where no one could see us. It was under a stairwell, so we couldn't stand up. It had no windows, so we couldn't see out, but it did have a Satanic poster on the wall—shades of the underworld. The TA had the desk, so I got to sit on the floor next to the kitty litter. I stayed there, in the redolent dark, for a full thirty seconds.

Then my voice returned, inside my head this time. Its message was powerful and clear, "If I ever do this again, I deserve what I get." I did finish the semester. But I never went back to that office. And I never again took another job that supported such an exploitative system, even though that meant commuting two thousand miles a week to my next job, a real job, in New Mexico. "Go for it," said Martin, and took care of the children while I was away.

### III. POISON IN THE PUBLIC IVY

Four years later we moved again to eliminate my cross-country commute. Through research support, graduate teaching, directing a writing program, and supervising some sixty TAs and part-time faculty, my New Mexico job



had given me a grownup voice. I was beginning to talk to colleagues throughout the country, at meetings, through my own publications and those of my students, and I was looking forward to continuing the dialogue on the new job as Associate Professor and Writing Director at a southern, and therefore by definition gracious, “public ivy.”

As I entered the mellowed, red-brick building on the first day of class, a colleague blocked the door. “We expected to get a beginning Assistant Professor and wash *him* out after three years,” he sneered. “Instead, we got *you*, and *you’ll* probably get tenure.” I took a deep breath and replied in a firm voice, “You bet.”

“We” contains multitudes; one never knows at the outset how many. Although the delegated greeter never spoke to me again, it soon became clear that *we* meant a gang of four equal opportunity harassers, all men, all tenured faculty of long standing, all eager to stifle my voice. Their voices, loud and long, dominated all department and committee meetings and, word had it, the weekly poker games where the decisions were really made. I could do no right. I was too nice to my students; everybody knows that undergraduates can’t write. I was merely flattering the students by encouraging them to publish; that they did indeed publish showed they were pandering to the public. My writing project work with schoolteachers was—aha!—proof that I was more interested in teaching than in literary criticism; misplaced priorities. My own publications, ever increasing, were evidence of blatant careerism. I received a number of grants and fellowships: just a way to get out of teaching. The attendant newspaper publicity, though good for the school, reflected badly on my femininity.

Although I was heard in class and increasingly in the profession at large, I had no voice in the departmental power structure. The gang of four and, by extrapolation, the rest of the faculty, already knew everything they needed to know about teaching writing, they’d learned it long ago as TAs. Faculty development workshops were a waste of time. The college didn’t need a Writing Director anyway; the students all wrote well, the faculty all taught well, and Southern Public Ivy had gotten along for two hundred years without a Writing Director. Why start now? As a way to forestall my imminent tenure review, this hospitable group initiated a review of the position of Writing Director. If they could demonstrate that there was no need for the job, despite the thousand students enrolled every semester in required Freshman English, not to mention the upper-division writing courses, oversubscribed and with waiting lists, and the initiative in other departments for a writing-across-the-curriculum program, I would not have the opportunity to come up for tenure. Because the review was, of

course, of the job and not of the person in it, I, of course, could not be consulted; that would compromise the impartiality of the process. Nor could I discuss the ongoing review with colleagues; ditto. Or the department chair; ditto. Or the dean; ditto, ditto.

The review began in September of my second year. Nobody identified its criteria; nobody told me what it covered; I could not ask. Occasionally a friendly colleague would sneak into my office during that very long fall semester and tell me that he was so anguished by the proceedings he wanted to resign from the review committee; *sotto voce* I urged him to stay on it. A borrowed voice was better than none. Rumor had it, I heard, that I was talking to a lawyer. How unprofessional. Or was I? I whispered. The campus AAUP president heard about the review; write me a letter, he said, outlining what's going on, and I'll send it to the national office. So I did. And he did.

Then, on a clear crisp evening in January, tenure became irrelevant. Our family dinner was interrupted by the phone call that every parent dreads. Come right away.

We saw the car first, on a curve in the highway near the high school, crushed into a concrete telephone pole. Next was the rescue squad ambulance, lights revolving red and white, halted amidst shattered glass. Then the figure on the stretcher, only a familiar chin emerging from the bandages that swathed the head. "He was thrown out of the back seat. The hatchback door smashed his face as if he'd been hit with an axe," said the medic. "I'm fine," said our son, and we responded with terror's invariable lie, "You're going to be all right."

After six hours of ambiguous X-rays, clear pictures finally emerged long after midnight, explaining why Laird's eyes were no longer parallel—one socket had simply been pulverized. The line of jagged-lightning stitches, sixty in all, that bolted across his face would be re-opened the next day for reconstructive surgery. "Don't go out in a full moon," sick-joked the doctor, howling like a banshee, "People will mistake you for a zombie."

Laird had to remain upright for a month so his head would drain, and our family spent every February evening on the couch in front of the wood stove, propping each other up. Every day the Writing Directorship review committee asked by memo for more information; every day I replied, automatically. I do not know, now, what they asked; I do not know, now, what I answered; or what I wrote on student papers; or what we ate, or read, or wrote checks for during that long month.

But I do know that in early March the AAUP's lawyer called me and his message was simple: "A university has every right to eliminate a position,

or a program, if there is no academic need, if there are no students in it, for example. But it cannot eliminate a position just to get rid of the person holding the job. If Southern Ivy does this, they'll be blacklisted." He repeated this to the department chair. When the department voted, in its new wisdom, in late April to table the review of the Writing Directorship until after I had been reviewed for tenure, a friend, safely tenured, whispered to me, "You just got tenure." The thick copies of the committee's review were never distributed; I was awarded tenure the next year—and left immediately to become department chair at Urban State University, tenured, promoted to Professor, with authority to have an emphatic voice. The review was never reinstated, says a faculty friend still at Southern Ivy; for six years the Writing Directorship went unfilled.

#### IV. ESCAPING THE RAPIST

Fortunately, even as department chair I could continue to teach, and I often taught Women Writers. One day my class, not only writing-intensive but discussion-intensive, began arguing about Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Some claimed that Arnold Friend, "thirty, maybe," who invades Connie's driveway in "an open jalopy, painted a bright gold," his eyes hidden behind mirrored, metallic sunglasses, is in love with the pubescent teenager about whom "everything has two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home." Others asserted that from the moment they met, Arnold's "Gonna get you, baby," signaled the abduction with which the story concludes. Though he does not lay a finger on his victim, Friend does, they pointed out, threaten to burn down her house and kill her parents—scarcely acts of love. After screaming for help into a disconnected phone until she loses her breath, Connie has no more voice and walks sacrificially out into the sunlight and Friend's mockingly waiting arms: "What else is there for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in? . . . You don't want [your family] to get hurt. . . . You're better than them because not a one of them would have done this for you."

Such compelling evidence clinched the debate, and I decided to reaffirm the students' interpretation with a life-saving story of my own. "A decade earlier," I began, taking a deep breath. I had never thought I would tell this story to my students. "My husband, adolescent sons, and I were camping in Scandinavia. But it was a dark and stormy night in Stockholm, so we decided to spend the night in a university dorm converted to a youth hostel for the summer. At ten p.m., the boys tucked in, Martin and I headed for the showers down the hall. He dropped me off in front of the

door decorated with a large, hand-lettered sign—Damar. Women. Frauen. Dames.—and went to the men’s shower at the other end of the long corridor. As I groped for a light switch in the pitch black room, it struck me as odd that the lights were off at night in a public building. The room was dead silent, not even a faucet dripping. I walked past a row of sinks to the curtained shower stall closest to the window, where I could leave my clothes and towel on the sill.

“As I turned, naked, to step into the shower, a man wearing a bright blue track suit and blue running shoes shoved aside the curtain of a shower stall across the aisle and headed toward me. I began to scream in impeccable English, ‘Get out! You’re in the women’s shower.’ He kept on coming. My voice had the wrong words, the wrong language. I screamed again, now into his face, looming over mine as he hit me on the mouth. I screamed again, ‘Get out!’ as he hit me on the cheek. My mouth was cut, I could taste the salty blood as he hit me again in the head. I began to lose my balance. ‘If he knocks me down on the tile,’ I thought, ‘he’ll kill me.’ Then I thought, still screaming, ‘I don’t want my children to hear this.’

“Then time slowed down, inside my head, the way it does just before you think your car is going to crash when it goes into a skid, and the voices, all mine, took over. One voice could say nothing at all for terror. I had never been hit before in my life. How could I know what to do? The man in blue, silent, continued to pummel my head, his face suffused with hatred, his eyes vacant. Another voice reasoned, ‘I need to get my clothes and get out.’ ‘But to get my clothes I’ll have to go past him twice.’ ‘I should just get out.’ Still I couldn’t move, the whirling blue arms continued to pound me, I was off balance now and afraid of falling. Then the angry message came, etched in adrenaline, ‘I didn’t ask for this, I don’t deserve it, and I’m not going to take it.’ I ran naked into the corridor.”

The bell rang. “You’re right,” I said. “Oates’s story is about violence, not love.” The students, whose effervescent conversation usually bubbled out into the corridor as they dispersed, filed out in silence.

That was on a Thursday. The following Tuesday, an hour before our next class meeting, a student, svelte and usually poised, came into my office, crying. “What’s the matter?” I asked. “Saturday night,” she said, “I was walking home alone—I live alone—and heard the phone ringing in my apartment. When I rushed in to answer it I must have left the door open. Because after I’d hung up, when I went into the kitchen a man stepped out from behind the curtain, grabbed me from behind, and shoved a gasoline-soaked rag over my face. As he began to wrestle with me, he ripped my shirt trying to throw me down. Suddenly I heard your voice in

my head, repeating the words you'd said in class, "I didn't ask for this, I don't deserve it, and I'm not going to take it." I ran, screaming, into the street and flagged a passing policeman. You saved my life."

"No," I said, "you saved your own life."

#### CODA

The computerized NCTE membership card says that my lifetime membership expires in 1999. As the date draws closer, I write headquarters about this. Several times, and still no answer.

I will have to raise my voice. My commitment to teaching English is, after all, for life.

#### NOTE

A variation of this chapter has been published as "Hearing Our Own Voices: Life-saving Stories" in *Writing Ourselves into the Story: Unheard Voices from Composition Studies*, ed. Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan Hunter (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992), 89–102.

## *Creative Nonfiction—Is There Any Other Kind?*

“WORKS OF NONFICTION CAN BE COHERENT AND CRAFTED WORKS OF literature,” observes Annie Dillard, in explaining her own work in this “misunderstood genre, literary nonfiction”:

It’s not simply that they’re carefully written, or vivid and serious and pleasing, like Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* or St. Exupéry’s wonderful memoir of early aviation, *Wind, Sand, and Stars*. It’s not even that they may contain elements of fiction, that their action reveals itself in scenes that use visual descriptions and that often use dialogue. . . .It’s that nonfiction accounts may be literary insofar as the parts of their structures cohere internally, insofar as the things are in them for the sake of the work itself, and insofar as the work itself exists in the service of idea (“To Fashion” 72–73).

Yet Dillard’s “literary nonfiction,” what I am calling here “creative nonfiction,” in the view of far too many critics and teachers is an oxymoron. As Jim Corder observes, this opinion holds that essays, “reports, propositions, evidences, reminiscences” are “chunks of actuality”: “They are not *fictions*; hence, they are not created.” As a consequence, such nonfiction modes “never made it into any hierarchy of literary types. They are outside and otherwise” (237).

In this exclusive, excluding definition, “creative” is equivalent to “fictive.” Any mode of writing that purports to be true, or to have a basis in fact, not only cannot be considered “creative” but is excluded from the literary canon and consequently from serious consideration as a work of literature (Rygiel 393–97; Tabachnick). Thus such nonfiction modes as autobiography, biography, diaries, letters, history, philosophy, social and political commentary, the literature of travel and place, nature writing, science writing, and much humor are rarely central to conventional literary

curricula, if they are included at all, either as works to be studied as literature, or as literary models for “creative writing.”

Burton Hatlen astutely observes in “Why is *The Education of Henry Adams* ‘Literature,’ While *The Theory of the Leisure Class* Is Not?” that as long as such writings are perceived to “tell the [literal] truth,” as long as they remain “live options,” they will not be read as literature. In this view, only when such works, for instance Emerson’s *Nature* or Henry Adams’s *Education*, are no longer seen as presenting “truth about the [actual] world” can they metamorphose into literature. In this altered status they can then be read “not as a description of the ‘real world,’ but rather as a coherent presentation of a ‘possible world’—a world which we do not inhabit, but which we find it profitable to visit from time to time” (672). Yet the texts to which Hatlen refers have not changed at all when they make the transition from the vast, vague, amorphous realm of nonfiction to the intimate province of literature—only the way of reading them has changed.

In a careful, thoughtfully reasoned argument, Hatlen proposes expanding the canon and the curriculum to include lively examples of these living modes of nonfiction—a view articulately argued as well by Phyllis Frus McCord in “Reading Nonfiction in Composition Courses: From Theory to Practice.” Thus Hatlen’s proposed course on “The Innocent Abroad: Travel Writings from Marco Polo to the Present” would include writers as diverse as William Byrd, Margaret Fuller, Darwin, Melville, Twain, Lawrence (T.E. and D.H.), Rebecca West, and Margaret Mead. A course in nature writing might range from Izaak Walton, Jonathan Edwards, and William Bartram to Thoreau and Darwin, to Henry Beston, Rachel Carson, Loren Eiseley, Stephen Jay Gould, Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and John McPhee.

To expand the literary canon by treating such nonfiction authors as the serious and distinguished stylists (as well as thinkers) that they are has a number of advantages both critical and pedagogical (see Butrym, *passim*). An expanded canon provides subjects and literary models that are accessible to a wide variety of students’ majors and interests (scientists, engineers, business majors). It furnishes expanded options for a lifetime of reading and perhaps writing that these students are likely to encounter in the real world after graduation. And it realistically reflects the dominant nature(s) and types of contemporary writing of quality—a phenomenon acknowledged by the “nonfiction” category recently added to the annual Associated Writing Programs’ contest, the hybrid features of which O.B. Hardison brilliantly describes in “Binding Proteus.”

The view of these scholars/teachers is eminently reasonable—in my opinion, incontrovertible. Indeed, I will argue here that although different

premises govern the essential transaction between writers and readers of nonfiction, as opposed to writers and readers of fiction, many forms of both creative nonfiction and fiction use the same literary techniques. Although my most detailed examples here involve published autobiographies, and student essays, the points I make apply as well to many other types of nonfiction writing.

For instance, S. Michael Halloran insightfully analyzes a 900-word scientific essay, "A Structure for Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid," James Watson and Francis Crick's understated proprietary claim to the double helix (*Nature*, 25 April 1953). Halloran shows how the article's "stylistic proclivities and the qualities of mental life of which those proclivities are tokens," (Edwin Black, qtd. in Halloran 71) carefully, perhaps insidiously, establish a distinctive *ethos*. With laconic economy, these scientists "dramatize themselves as intellectual beings in a particular style," articulating through their argument, genteel language, and ironic understatement "a recognizable public persona"—that of "*the scientist speaking*"—in deliberate contrast to their actual mode of behavior; "in the flesh they were obstreperous and irreverent" (74–5). In this brief report, as in their later publications, Watson and Crick employ a "confident, personal, rhetorically adept *ethos*" (79)—in contrast to another, quite different, yet equally contrived scientific *ethos* found in many other technical writings, that of the cautious, depersonalized transmitter of masses of data, carefully and conservatively interpreted. Halloran argues that Watson and Crick's style and *ethos* greatly enhanced their claim for rapid admission of their theory "to the canon of established knowledge in biology" (78), while comparable claims couched in more cautious rhetoric were treated far more skeptically.

Halloran's analysis of the rhetorical strategies of Watson and Crick, in a nonfiction mode erroneously considered by many to be objective and straightforward, even inartistic, reinforces my claim—and I overstate the case only slightly, to emphasize the point—there is no other kind of nonfiction except creative nonfiction.<sup>1</sup> It follows then that all advanced composition courses, no matter how general or how specialized, should reflect that premise and an awareness of these literary techniques, as do the courses that I describe in the concluding section of this paper.

#### READER-WRITER TRANSITIONS IN FICTION AND NONFICTION

Fiction, poetry, and drama—"creative writing"—are by definition fictive, "drawn from the imagination of the author rather than from history or fact."<sup>2</sup> Readers understand, respect, and accept this as a fundamental quality of the work: they do not believe that what they are reading is literally true,



and they do not hold the author accountable for presenting verifiable fact. This is the case even with fictive works in which there is an extraordinary concern for verisimilitude, such as *Robinson Crusoe*, which in their biographical particulars, even on the title page, are indistinguishable from bona fide autobiographies.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, in *Autobiographical Acts*, Elizabeth W. Bruss explores the proposition that the major difference between fiction and nonfiction is not necessarily dependent on structural or stylistic features of a given text but on the way readers respond to that text. Bruss offers three criteria for defining autobiography and distinguishing it from fiction, derived from John R. Searle's speech act theory. What she says about autobiography applies to other forms of nonfiction as well.

1. Nonfiction works are assumed to represent and to be derived from facts that, independent of the text itself, are assumed to be publicly verifiable.
2. These works purport to be true, whether they are concerned with private experiences or publicly observable occasions. Readers are expected to accept the author's truth, although they are free to try either to verify or discredit it.
3. The writers of these works purport to believe what they assert, "whether or not what is reported can be discredited, whether or not it can be reformulated in some more generally acceptable way from another point of view" (10–11).

In short, irrespective of formal characteristics or mode, different premises govern the transaction between readers and writers of fiction and nonfiction. Readers of nonfiction assume, with reason, that writers are telling the truth, usually verifiable. Writers of nonfiction agree, implying or claiming that they are telling the truth even as they are shaping, interpreting, and recreating their subject. They do not do this to mislead their readers or to deny the truth but to get at the essential truth that lies beneath, or within, the mass of details that occur in the course of everyday existence. Thus for writers of nonfiction, as for writers of fiction, the significant or essential truth may at times be most accurately conveyed by altering features of the existential truth. While all serious writers know this, the literalists among the readers may not and, innocent of the "felt truth," may erroneously expect total external verifiability as the basis for a faithful rendition.

In commenting on how he wrote *Growing Up*, his autobiography, Russell Baker answers the question "How much of your book is truthful and how much is good writing?":<sup>4</sup>

Well, all the incidents are truthful. A book like that has certain things in common with fiction. Anything that is autobiographical is the opposite of biography. The

biographer's problem is that he never knows enough. The autobiographer's problem is that he knows much too much. He knows absolutely everything; he knows the whole iceberg, not just the tip. . . . So when you're writing about yourself, the problem is what to leave out. And I left out almost everything [that didn't contribute psychologically, artistically to "the story line"]—there's only about half a percent in that book. You wouldn't want everything; it would be like reading the Congressional Record. ("Life" 49–50)

## READING AND WRITING CREATIVE NONFICTION

Readers of fiction do not make the same assumption as readers of nonfiction: they expect writers to shape, interpret, and even invent their subject. Thus, although many of the processes and techniques of fiction are common to both, fictive works command a different response than nonfiction does.

College teachers whose courses include both fiction and autobiography have doubtless seen this generalization verified. In my own experience students, ranging from innocent freshmen to sophisticated graduates, invariably read autobiography as the true story of an actual life, irrespective of its fictive qualities. Yet they never treat fiction (except autobiographical bildungsroman, such as Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*) as if its characters existed outside the books. Thus they respond, intimately and sympathetically, to Richard Wright's *Black Boy* as the angry, searing account of an actual life of deprivation and prejudice; but treat with far greater detachment Wright's equally angry, searing account of Bigger Thomas's life of deprivation and prejudice in the fictional *Native Son* because they do not believe it really happened.

Yet, as McCord wisely contends in "Reading Nonfiction in Composition Courses," it is not only possible but appropriate to encourage students to read nonfiction and fiction alike with attention to the way "their form embodies their message," that is, with attention to their "literary elements" rather than with regard to whether or not they are true.<sup>5</sup> In this way of reading, "fictionality turns out to be a rhetorical category, rather than a definition which requires us to read by disregarding a work's truth claims and viewing it simply as an 'as-if' construction" (750–50; Hatlen 672–74). What is an appropriate rationale for reading, I contend, is an equally appropriate rationale for writing truly creative nonfiction and especially germane to courses in advanced composition.

Neither students nor anyone else should have difficulty in conceiving of nonfiction as creative, because both fiction and nonfiction have so many formal elements in common. As Halloran's analysis of Watson and Crick's

scientific prose illustrates, writers of nonfiction establish, as do all writers, persona and voice. They interpret their subject, adapt style and structure to that interpretation, employ themes and motifs, repetition and variation. In many cases they use monologue, dialogue, scenes, characterizations, and other features associated with fiction but that are nearly as common in nonfiction. It is consequently not surprising that many of the best autobiographies are written by novelists accustomed to using fictive models and techniques (indicated in brackets in the examples below). They know how to tell a good story to get at, as Yeats says, the truth that is at “the deep heart’s core.”

In the first volume of her autobiography, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, Mary McCarthy employs the unusual technique of providing an afterword to each chapter, in which she tries to sort out memory from imagination, sometimes questioning her own fidelity to fact, while continuing to assert the truth of the heart. McCarthy’s parents died when she was six, leaving her and her three younger brothers under the guardianship of an ill-assorted Dickensian couple—dull-witted, abusive Uncle (by marriage) Myers and his unimaginative but doting middle-aged wife, Aunt Margaret [*characterization, character types*]. In the “Tin Butterfly” chapter, McCarthy anatomizes her searing memory of a prolonged conflict with Myers, a test of wills and stamina of body and character [*dramatic conflict*]. When a tin butterfly from a Cracker Jack box [*symbolic object*], Mary’s infant brother’s prized (and virtually only) possession, disappeared, Margaret and her scrawny wards tore apart the house in a frenzied search. To no avail. The search continued, amidst escalating emotion as Myers accused Mary of taking the butterfly and she protested her innocence [*rising action; conflict of good and evil*]. When, in perverted triumph, Myers flung back the tablecloth to reveal the butterfly pinned to the silence cloth under Mary’s plate [*dramatic gesture*], she continued to deny his accusation [*escalation of emotional intensity*]. The “terrible whipping” that ensued could not make her confess to a crime that she hadn’t committed, despite the pleas of her terrified aunt for Mary to lie and stop the torture [*this conflict is expressed through dialogue and action*]. That is the incident as McCarthy recalls it, memorialized in an architectonically elegant account.

But did the incident really happen that way? From a retrospective adult view, 30 years after the fact and enhanced by a self-righteously—and self-servingly—moralistic memory, McCarthy wonders. Did Myers actually perpetrate this malevolent plot? Or did Mary “fuse two [separate] memories,” the butterfly episode and the whipping (which her brothers can verify) and “the idea that Uncle Myers put the butterfly at my place,” which may have

been suggested by her college playwriting teacher? She can't remember; she acknowledges the alternatives; she apologizes (*"mea culpa"*); but nevertheless leaves in this chilling evidence of Myers's "capricious brutality" (82–83).

In writing his autobiography, *Growing Up*, journalist Russell Baker had to contend with the opposite problem, too much information but no central characters. The book's first version consisted of 450 pages of careful, "newspaper reportage" of Baker's aged relatives "talking about what life was like long ago." "Being the good journalist, I kept myself out of it" ("Life" 41). Being the dutiful son, he kept his domineering mother out, too. Finally, during a candid lunch with his unhappy editor, Baker realized that he had to rewrite the whole book, which "was about the tension between child and his mother, and everything had to hinge on that. . . . I had been dishonest about my mother. What I had written, though it was accurate to the extent that the reporting was there, was dishonest because of what I had left out. . . . And that dishonesty left a great hollow in the center of the original book" ("Life" 43–44).

The totally rewritten version restored the central characters, focused on their taut relationship, and so became an honest book, compellingly endearing. Baker's mother, Lucy, widowed young during the Depression, nagged, prodded, poked, and harangued him to "make something of yourself" [*characterization*]. Lucy insisted that her son, an unusually shy, timid, bookish nine-year-old, sell *The Saturday Evening Post* to passing motorists [*introduction of primary conflict*]*—*a task his younger sister performed with aplomb while Baker cowered [*characterization, secondary conflict*]. Predictably, the tension escalated as Baker grew older and sought to escape her control. As a college student and Navy veteran, Baker stayed out late (and didn't tell her where he was going, or with whom) [*development of new dramatic conflict*]. Then, as a fledgling reporter he took up with Mimi, exactly the kind of woman he knew his mother would disapprove of. Mimi, the antithesis of the "wholesome," dull girls Baker's mother liked, smoked, drank, and wore bright lipstick and sexy clothes. She had a job, lived in an apartment (rather than safe at home), and dated men she met on business trips [*symbolic as well as literal manifestations of character*]. Baker waged his ultimate struggle to attain maturity and independence over his right to marry Mimi [*major conflict established through a succession of scenes*], and thus successfully opposed his mother even while fulfilling her prime tenet: as a writer, to "make something of yourself."

#### LITERARY TECHNIQUES IN CONTEMPORARY NONFICTION

The literary techniques discussed here pervade distinguished twentieth-century nonfiction, attaining their most conspicuous concentration in

such works as Tom Wolfe's *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* and Truman Capote's "nonfiction novel," *In Cold Blood*. Though these techniques are not new, they appear in greater abundance and in more combinations in contemporary nonfiction than in comparable writings of previous centuries. Nevertheless, examples may be found in some types of medieval and Elizabethan works, such as the partly fictive *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (first published in 1366) and the more reliable compilation *Hakluyt's Voyages* (1600), notably in accounts by Anthony Jenkinson and Sir John Hawkins.

Many contemporary nonfiction authors, for instance, make their points through carefully designed compositions of scenes: Jan Morris interprets the native customs and haunts of "Manhattan" and *Venice*; George Orwell demonstrates the political antagonism between colonists and natives in Moulmein and "Marrakech": Jonathan Kozol pleads for decent family housing by introducing us to *Rachel and Her Children* and a host of other *Homeless Families in America*.

Each nonfiction author of distinction has a recognizable style, an identifiable persona. Investigative reporter Jessica Mitford, grand dame of contemporary muckrakers, appraises famous writers with ironic self-righteousness. Nature writers, unassuming loners like Thoreau and Annie Dillard, are self-reliant, resourceful optimists, confident that careful observation will be rewarding: "I wake expectant," says Annie Dillard, "There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises" (*Pilgrim* 2, 16). Scientists (except for the schemers like James Watson racing for the Nobel Prize) are generally cool and competent, even when, like Rachel Carson, they are passionately committed to preserving the sea around us.

Yet even scientific writers such as physicians Oliver Sacks (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*), Richard Selzer (*Mortal Lessons*), and Lewis Thomas (*The Lives of a Cell*) use dialogue to clarify the nature of disease, the functioning of the human body, or the way scientific phenomena work. Thomas even has the audacity (or *joie de vivre*, if you will) to personify moths under the irresistible influence of pheromones: "'At home, 4 p.m. today,' says the female moth, and releases a brief explosion of bombykol, a single molecule of which will tremble the hairs of any male within miles and send him driving upwind in a confusion of ardor" (18).

Other writers also employ these techniques in diverse nonfiction modes: E.B. White's benevolently incisive interpretations of city and country life. Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical writings, mingling "dream and memory, myth and desire"—techniques also found in

the autobiographies of Eudora Welty, Vladimir Nabokov, Alfred Kazin, Frank Conroy, and a host of others. Robert Coles's interviews, portraits, and sociological analyses. Jonathan Raban's worldwide travel writings—"there is a *there* there"; and Paul Theroux's long railway journeys. M.F.K. Fisher's and Calvin Trillin's deliciously vigorous discussions of food and places. John McPhee's accounts of geology, country doctors, oranges, Alaska. Berton Rouéche's "Medical Detectives," a decades-long *New Yorker* series on public health investigators in action. Stephen Jay Gould's careful scientific analyses that become arguments for current social policy, as in *The Mismeasure of Man*; and William Warner's evocative natural history, *Beautiful Swimmers*, that does likewise. Carl Sagan's analyses of physical phenomena that range from the height of the heavens to the end of the world.

None of these writings is objective; all of them are true, and their authors are utterly reliable. These works epitomize creative nonfiction; there is no other kind.

#### TEACHING STUDENTS TO WRITE CREATIVE NONFICTION

If there were a single ideal advanced composition course, especially one guaranteed to produce truly advanced (if not distinguished) writers, there might be some consensus on what it would be, in theory or in practice. But alas, college teachers appear to be no closer to agreement now than they have been during the past thirty years (see Dicks; P. Tate "Survey").<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible for any advanced composition course to incorporate instruction in the techniques of creative nonfiction, as long as it concentrates on actually writing rather than on studying grammar, linguistics, the history of the language, rhetorical theory, or other material learned primarily through reading rather than writing (see Dicks 182–84). This is true no matter whether the course emphasizes the conventional material of freshman composition, tightened up a notch; critical or argumentative writing; narrative or descriptive writing; journalistic feature writing; legal, business, technical, or scientific writing; or writing in the student's major field, perhaps even including the writing of grant proposals, since the results must be projected in advance of conducting the research—truly an imaginative act.

The rest of this essay will demonstrate ways in which the advanced writing courses I taught at Virginia Commonwealth University (1982–88) encouraged the writing of creative nonfiction. One of the courses is Advanced Composition, an upper-level undergraduate course in belletristic and/or feature writing, variations of which I have also taught over the

past twenty years at Case Western Reserve and Butler universities, the College of William and Mary, and the University of New Mexico. This course attracts undergraduates in diverse majors wanting to improve their writing, journalism students seeking extra practice in supervised feature writing, and others aspiring to professional publication, including some faculty in science and medicine. The other course is Writing Nonfiction, a graduate workshop in professional nonfiction writing offered for the past four years as part of VCU's M.F.A. program in creative writing, but open to M.A. students in English as well. The common features of these courses include philosophy, aims, approach, and subject matter.

### Philosophy

These courses affirm a self-fulfilling prophecy, that every student who takes an advanced writing course of any kind can learn to write with a fair amount of sophistication and a great amount of enjoyment. Writing and rewriting, with constant feedback on works-in-progress from peers and an instructor who also writes and rewrites and publishes, are the heart and soul of each course.

These courses assume a continuum of writing ability extending from innocence on the freshman level to considerable experience on the graduate level; each course on the continuum represents a distinct *advance* over its predecessors in knowledge of and expectations about writing. No advanced course should duplicate and preferably not even review material covered in freshman composition, unless this is done in individual conferences. Although the techniques of creative nonfiction are not off-limits to beginning writers, advanced composition courses are better suited to the development of more sophisticated writing, which involves setting scenes, presenting carefully contrived and perhaps diverse authorial personae and voices, experimenting with alternative and sometimes dramatic organizational structures, creating or recreating characters and scenes, and employing dialogue and figurative language.

### Aims

These advanced composition courses aim to enable students to write very well, in a diversity of nonfiction modes, for a real audience (or audiences) of the student's choosing, and to attain clarity, grace, and an individual style in the process; to develop some measure of ease and efficiency in their writing process(es); and to publish. Even those students who take the undergraduate course primarily to fill a requirement are soon won over when they see that it is possible for their peers to accomplish these aims. My students do publish—in student, suburban,

and metropolitan newspapers; in trade publications, in-house documents, and state agency newsletters and pamphlets; in little magazines, professional journals, and with small and major trade presses. Students who publish invariably inspire those who don't, or who haven't yet done so, for peer success brings the seemingly impossible within reach.

Emphasis on writing for an audience other than one's classmates—perhaps the amorphous one acknowledged by Gertrude Stein's "I write for myself and strangers"—is the best incentive I know for encouraging students to use the techniques of creative nonfiction. For instance, they can ask of their own or others' writings such questions as the following:

- What kind of authorial persona does this piece present? Does the author come across as knowledgeable, honest, engaging, or in other ways that either reinforce or undermine the message?
- Does the author consciously play or create any roles (expert, advocate, humorous character, innocent)? In what voice(s) does the author speak? Have any other attributes of an authorial persona crept in unintentionally to indicate an author incompetent, rambling, or insensitive to the audience/ If so, what can be done to alter these negative elements? (See L. Bloom *Fact and Artifact* 20–29)
- Does the form of the writing (such as narrative, argument, technical report, how-to) fulfill an audience's expectations of the typical mode? (For instance, does a scientific paper sound like and follow the format of a typical scientific paper? Does a travel piece transport its readers happily to an unfamiliar locale, specifically described?) If so, what saves the writing from being humdrum and thoroughly predictable? If not, do its unique features enhance its content?
- What is the writing's structure (e.g., straightforward chronological narrative, step-by-step account of a process, give-and-take of an argument, or a developing relationship)? Are there other arrangements of the same or alternative materials, such as flashbacks or sequences of scenes, that would make the point more convincing, memorable?
- If the material were dramatized through scenes, characters, dialogue, would it come alive in appropriate ways?
- In what ways, if any, would more colorful language enhance the presentation? Could the same point(s) be made through a higher proportion of figurative language, such as similes or extended metaphors, than is currently or customarily used?

### The Way it Works

Students will not grow and develop as writers unless they are both rigorous thinkers and risk-takers—willing to experiment with subject, form, style. As Eudora Welty says, "All serious daring starts from within." The two



central questions, always asked in tandem, that govern class discussion of both student and professional writing are more daring than they seem, because they imply that the text (and therefore the writer) is never static and always susceptible to change: What's right about this piece? What could be done to make it better? These positively oriented questions encourage students to become discriminating listeners to prose (especially their own), as well as discriminating readers and writers. These make it easy to both imagine and try out some of the possibilities suggested by the techniques of creative nonfiction identified above, and more.

A low-key way to encourage such experimentation is to use what I call the eye-doctor approach, reiterating my eye doctor's perpetual question in selecting the right lenses: "Is it better *this* way? Or [inserting a different lens into the viewing machine] *this* way?" And again, with different lenses, "Is it better *this* way? Or *this* way?" "*This* way? Or *this* way?" After trying (or even imagining) a myriad of possibilities, you know you've found the best way when the blurry universe suddenly snaps into focus, etching even minute details with sharp precision. The sharper the vision, the more effective the criticism, whether of one's own writing, a peer's, or professional's—and the students are on their way to becoming tough-minded and, ultimately, independent judges of writing. Their learning and, one hopes, their writing must last a lifetime, not just a semester.

#### SUBJECT MATTER

Anything, everything should be included, most of it written in modes common to belletristic nonfiction, which are discussed in detail in my book *Fact and Artifact: Writing Nonfiction*. These include writings about people, places, performances (including music, theater, books, restaurants, sports), controversy, science, how-to, and humor (including parody, satire, and humorous narrative). Four examples of typical student writing illustrate the possibilities (the techniques of creative nonfiction are indicated after each passage).

\* \* \*

*Writing about people:* autobiographical narratives, interviews, character sketches, individual or group portraits, delineation of a significant relationship, partial biography, family history.

"Red Eubanks, Foreman," by Steve O'Connor

Just then a huge, jacked-up green Chevy pick-up roared in through the mud tracks left by the derrick-tractor. I could see a Confederate flag decal on the back window and a fat, freckled hand grabbing the can of Skoal off the dashboard. . . . Red seemed glad to see me when I introduced myself, and he smothered my hand

as I shook his beefy paw. I surveyed my new boss and saw that he was a short man, but built like a tank, with forearms as thick as telephone poles. With his fiery orange hair and sharp, inspecting eyes riveting on me over his barrel chest, I hoped that I would never be the object of this man's anger. . . . Opening a can of Skoal and, to my shock, shoving the entire contents into the fat cheek, Red called the attention of the crew. "Men, this here's Steve. He's a college boy from New Mexico State, the Aggies, and he's gonna be with us for summer." Bits of the powdered tobacco were flying out of his mouth. "Now I want you all to go easy on this boy for the first couple days, so's we can show him we got nuthin' against Yankees."

*Persona:* Refined college student. *Tone:* Red—energetic, robust, confident; student—somewhat timid. *Scene:* Construction site. *Symbolic details:* jacked-up pickup truck, Confederate flag, chewing tobacco. *Figurative language:* built like a tank, forearms as thick as telephone poles. *Dialogue and dialect:* This here's Steve. . . . we got nuthin' against Yankees. *Characterization:* Entire passage.

\* \* \*

*Writing about places:* descriptions of favorite (or detested) places, reflections on the natural world—for its own sake or for the writer's; interpretations of places as contexts for social criticism—to call attention to problems, to promote corrective action; interpretations of places as contexts for exploration and adventure; guides for prospective travelers to a particular place, region, country.

"Nobody Sticks Around After a Loss," by Ray Hatcher

As John dresses he notices through the steel-grated window that the parking lot is emptying fast; nobody sticks around after a loss. Air from the cheap K-mart fan gives John goose pimples. With no one in the locker room except himself, he is struck by the emptiness. He hears the water drip from a leaky shower head, and the meow of an abandoned cat. A stale smell of body odor and moldy clothes fills his sinuses. On the filthy carpet his laundry bag resembles a dead animal run over by a truck; and in the dim light the shoulder pads piled on top of the lockers look like the carcasses of some prehistoric creatures. The locker room door echoes as he slams it. Nobody sticks around after a loss.

*Point of view:* sympathetic third-person observer. *Tone:* melancholy. *Scene:* deserted locker room. *Symbolic details:* steel-grated window, cheap fan, dripping shower, abandoned cat. . . . *Figurative language:* laundry bag resembles a dead animal, shoulder pads look like prehistoric carcasses. *Characterization:* defeated athlete.

\* \* \*

*Writing about science:* definitions, explanations or interpretations of things, phenomena, concepts and theories, processes—for a general or a specialized audience; critique of others’ research; research of technical reports; case histories; literature reviews; grant proposals.

“Acid Rain,” by Kelly Shea

The “certain substances” added [to rain, dew, mist] are pollutants, namely sulfur and nitrogen oxides, formed from smelting and the burning of coal, oil, and gas. When these fossil fuels are burned, the oxides are evolved. When combined with water in any form, the oxides produce—surprise!—sulfuric and nitric acids. So when the oxides are emitted into the atmosphere, and then precipitation comes down through them, the acids are formed, causing acid rain.

So, how are lakes and streams affected, when most industrial smelting factories and comparable industries are located in and around cities? How can the Parthenon be endangered when there are obviously no factories in the immediate area? First, don’t forget automobiles, crafty culprits contributing to the emission of the dangerous oxides. But the four-wheeled demon. . .

*Persona:* breezy, knowledgeable interpreter. *Tone:* vigorous, cheerful. *Figurative language:* automobiles, four-wheeled demons, crafty culprits. *Stylistic features:* rhetorical questions, exclamation—“surprise!”

\* \* \*

*Writing about controversy:* direct arguments; implied arguments (through single case, dramatic vignette, satire); investigative reporting.

“December Seventh is the Ides of March,” by Cheryl Watanabe

After the homes were lost, the businesses destroyed, after the furniture was sold or stolen, after the fathers were taken away and the rights of the land-born children erased you come—to offer money and recognition. Deeds not willing to be forgotten haunt you: Utah or California, horse stalls for hotels, manure for freshener, the death of our sons in Italy whose parents, buried deep in the desert, watered the brush with tears. But your offer comes too late. The children have grown, the night classes paid for, the businesses reestablished, and prominence regained. Your money is not wanted and is not needed. Save your inflated dollars. We have wealth enough to forgive with charity. Just put it in the textbooks, you never put it in the textbooks.

In California thongs are still Nipper Flippers or Jap Slaps. People imitate Japanese (or is it Chinese?) when I walk by. December seventh is the Ides of March. I’m asked how I can see, is my field of vision narrowed?

*Persona*: Japanese-American social critic. *Tone*: measured and angry. *Scene*: desert internment camp. *Symbolic details*: horse stalls for hotels, manure for freshener, parents watering the brush with tears. *Figurative language*: December seventh is the Ides of March. *Stylistic features*: epigram (wealth enough to forgive with charity), unusual capitalizations (Nipper Flippers, Jap Slaps), rhetorical questions.

\* \* \*

The students in these courses, graduate and undergraduate alike, quickly form a community. In their roles as readers, writers, editors, critics—risktakers all—they become friends, holding the safety net for their colleagues up there on the tightrope. They have as a common culture the shared texts they themselves have created. Even though they write in different voices, with different personae, they truly speak the same language, the language of creative nonfiction. Most students don't want the course to end. Neither do I. So I remind them that advanced writers will continue to advance; the course is only the beginning.

## NOTES

1. The allusion here and in my title to the strategy of the rhetorical question in Elliott Mishler's "Meaning in Context: Is There Any Other Kind?" is intentional. The answer can only be "no."
2. Holman and Harmon, 202. That this standard *Handbook to Literature* has no separate entry for or definition of *nonfiction*, even in a recent (1986) edition implicitly verifies my earlier point, that nonfiction is conventionally excluded from the province of literature. Even its very label is negative, implying not what it is but what it is not.
3. The title page to the first edition (1719) reads, "The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoque; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pyrates. Written by Himself." This perfectly mimics the rhetorical conventions and design of the conventional title pages of *bona fide* eighteenth- and nineteenth-century autobiographies, of which two randomly selected examples will suffice: "Death Valley in '49. Important Chapter of California Pioneer History. The autobiography of a pioneer, detailing his life from a humble home in the Green Mountains to the gold mines of California; and particularly reciting the sufferings of the band of men, women, and children who gave 'Death Valley' its name," by William Lewis Manly (1894); and the comparatively restrained, "The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by

- Himself. His early life as a slave, his escape from bondage, and his complete history” (1892, revised fourth edition).
4. It is odd that the interrogator, William Zinsser, himself a sophisticated writer of nonfiction, should make this arbitrary, artificial, and basically wrong discrimination between truth and “good writing”; his own experience must tell him that these are not antithetical.
  5. Certainly this is the emphasis of much contemporary criticism of autobiography. Georges Gusdorf articulated a number of basic critical premises in “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” which contends that “Every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment; it does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been. . . . In giving his own narrative, the man is forever adding himself to himself. So creation of a literary world begins with the author’s confession: the narrative that he makes of his life is already a first work of art, the first deciphering of an affirmation that, at a further stage of stripping down and recomposing, will open out in novels, in tragedies, or in poems” (45). Three (among many) excellent critical works that in various ways reinforce this premise are Paul John Eakin’s *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, Linda H. Peterson’s *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation*, and William L. Andrews’s *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865*.
  6. In a 1984 survey of 115 advanced composition teachers, Priscilla Tate found 40 different titles of “post-freshman” writing courses, excluding advanced composition, journalism, and creative writing courses.

## *Reading, Writing, Teaching Essays as Jazz*

THE MAJOR MOTIF: *Fascinatin' Rhythm*

Essays are the jazz of literature, fluid and flexible in form. Essays mix rhythms, modes, tones; they break rules, blend genres, blur distinctions between author, subject, and discipline. Because essays speak in conspicuous, personal-sounding styles, they're engaging to students and to "common readers" and writers alike. But the jazz-like elements that make essays accessible to readers, and worth the risk for writers—their play, freedom, seeming spontaneity, their grounding in the realm of "human evidence" rather than the deconstructive ether (see Anderson, "Hearsay Evidence")—make them problematic for critics and teachers. These interpreters spend too much time and effort defining and redefining this protean genre and worrying about its status, unless as essayists themselves they experience the genre from the inside out. Understanding the essay as jazz can help teachers and critics, writers, too, to resolve these difficulties. That is the argument of this chapter.

ESSAY FRAGMENT #1: *Hello Central, get me Doctor Jazz*

I was a professor's kid, wholesome and highbrow from the get-go. Reared on *The New York Times* B.C. (before color, and no funnies). And hardcover library books—no trash. No TV—though we could listen to Jack Benny on Sunday nights if we'd done our homework. Sex was a dirty word, like money, whose four-letter alternatives I didn't learn until I read Chaucer and Henry Miller in grad school, too late to use with insouciance. The family stereo would tolerate only classical records, and George Gershwin, though behind closed doors and late at night my father indulged in his secret vice, playing ragtime on our out-of-tune upright. How comforting it was to fall asleep to the professor's tinny rhythm, its tinkling counterpoint almost obliterating the night noises of the New Hampshire woods where we lived. Meanwhile I was struggling with the violin, my mother's cracked hand-me-down whose label identified it, in English, as a "genuine

Stradivarius.” For a dozen years I had an uneasy relationship with this abrasive instrument, until in one stroke my college violin teacher broke it off. “You know,” he said, “you really should become a writer.” He had never read a word I’d written.

Why should he have done so, or indeed, anyone else who didn’t have to? For I was learning, only too well, to imitate the models of my egghead professors, writing critical articles in course after course after course. I could turn one out in a week, or overnight if I had to, fifteen pages, plus footnotes and bibliography. Banished were the first person, contractions, and the lush description I’d lingered over in romantic novels—“purple patch,” scoffed my mentors. The call of stories yielded to the polysyllabic, polyvalent jargon of academic discourse I had begun to use. Driven underground were the fun and wit and play that had made me fall in love with Dr. Seuss at the age of six—and promptly decide to become a writer. Although in graduate school I had rented a room in the tower of babel, and was filling it up with proper academic furniture, I couldn’t bear to move completely out of the house of nonfiction, funky, ramshackle, rambling, full of surprises. I couldn’t turn off the jazzy language in my head, raucous, rebellious, sexy, and subversive. So I started writing essays as letters in my mind.

RHYTHM SECTION: *It Don’t Mean a Thing if it ain’t got That Swing*

Take five, hot or cool, fast or slow. Improvise. Vary the tempo. Stomp your feet. Clap your hands. Shake, rattle, and roll.

READING ESSAYS: CRITICS AND COMMON READERS: *Anything Goes*

Until recently, twentieth century highbrow critics have mostly ignored this maverick genre as too lowly, too simple, too amorphous to be treated seriously. Even now, those critics who do focus on essays get stuck on definitions and status and can’t seem to get beyond these to look closely at the vast and varied literature that constitutes the essays themselves. Any literary form whose boundaries can’t be broached is bound to be treated as marginal.

What indeed do critics mean when they talk about “bellevistic prose,” “literary nonfiction,” or that oxymoron, “creative nonfiction”? Sophisticates who sail through sonnets or sestinas without missing a hemidemisemiquaver feel obliged to identify the common features of this familiar genre that can range from memoir, character sketch, or travel narrative; to natural, cultural or social history or commentary; to popular science writing and reviews. And well they might, for as Hardison notes, *essay* “plays the same role in literary criticism that the term ‘miscellaneous’ does in budgeting” (13).

Oh no, not another definition of *essay*. Oh yes, because I can't get away without one. For a fundamental problem of the commentators lies in their innocent assumption that the term still means what it meant to its parent, Montaigne, in 1580, "a trial, an attempt." This wily strategist explains his apparently spontaneous mode of composition the way a jazz player might describe improvisation, "I do not correct my first ideas by later ones. . . . I wish to represent the progress of my moods, and that each part shall be seen at its birth." Montaigne adds, "I have no other drill-master than chance to arrange my writings. As my thoughts present themselves to my mind, I bring them together" (574). I argue below that Montaigne's seeming casualness is just that, a pose.<sup>1</sup>

Equally well-crafted are the many personae of a host of contemporary essayists, including the ostentatiously laid-back E.B. White, the essayist's essayist. White, after identifying the writer's ability to "be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter—philosopher, scold, jester, raconteur, confidant, pundit, devil's advocate, enthusiast," demotes his metier to second-class citizenship. Those aiming for a Nobel Prize, he says, had better write in high culture modes, novels, poems, plays, "and leave the essayist to ramble about, content with living a free life and enjoying the satisfactions of a somewhat undisciplined existence" (vii). Butrym, among those contemporary critics who treat essays as first rate and first class, wonders, as well he might, whether White's remark is "to be taken at face value," or whether "such self-deprecation [is] a convention of the form" (5).

Even William H. Gass, who makes the most perceptive distinctions between the essay and "that awful object, 'the article,'" diminishes the very genre of which he is a dazzling practitioner<sup>2</sup> by implicitly restricting his analysis to familiar essays and ignoring the broader category of literary nonfiction. Nevertheless, he is right on target in emphasizing that the essayist is more interested in the process of thinking about a subject than in having the last word, in "exposing this aspect and then that; proposing possibilities, reciting opinions" (25). And he nails down, in fact skewers, the academic article in a jazzy single sentence that could appear only in an essay, but never in an article for reasons that Gass makes apparent:

As an article, it should be striking of course, original of course, important naturally, yet without possessing either grace or charm or elegance, since these qualities will interfere with the impression of seriousness which it wishes to maintain; rather its polish is like that of the scrubbed step; but it must appear complete and straightforward and footnoted and useful and certain and is very likely a veritable Michelin of misdirection; for the article pretends that everything is clear, that its



argument is unassailable, that there are no soggy patches, no illicit inferences, no illegitimate connections; its manners are starched, stuffy, it would wear a dress suit to a barbecue, silk pajamas to the shower; it knows, with respect to every subject and point of view it is ever likely to entertain, what words to use, what form to follow, what authorities to respect; it is the careful product of a professional, and therefore it is written as only writing can be written, even if, at various times, versions have been given a dry dull voice at a conference, because, spoken aloud, it still sounds like writing written down, writing born for its immediate burial in a Journal. (25–26)

The etymological fallacy of identifying essays as tentative, trial works in contrast to articles, assertive and complete, when coupled with the deceptive remarks of practicing essayists writing in the first (and therefore of course sincere) person, are calculated to mislead critics into believing that the essay is both artless and low culture. As true sophisticates know, accessibility and apparent simplicity, rather than being signs of naivete, may well indicate high rather than low culture, in essays and in jazz alike.<sup>3</sup> In taking it, again and again, from the top, critics can never get to the bottom of the subject.

But these are not the concerns of real readers, those “common readers” respected and loved by Samuel Johnson and Virginia Woolf and by anybody else who writes for readers “uncorrupted by literary prejudices,” rather than for critics (see Woolf 1). For it is the common readers who, like Eudora Welty’s mother, used to “read Dickens in the spirit in which she would have eloped with him” (7), read and love belletristic essays without worrying about their definition or status. Common readers—and let us include ourselves among them—come to essays as they come to jazz, in the expectation that the heart and soul are the best route to the mind.

The biggest problem for common readers is not what to read, for essays abound, but where to find these works in libraries and bookstores. The Library of Congress subject heading, *essays*, jumbles every sort of nonfiction prose together; Princeton’s on-line catalog, for instance, has 30,000 entries for *essay* between 1980 and 1988. Butrym notes the vague, eclectic, and consequently unhelpful subject heading, “essay,” that the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* uses. This mingles “learned treatises of all sorts with the works of classical essay writers such as Montaigne, Lamb, and Bacon,” but omits the works of contemporary belletristic essayists, such as Richard Selzer, Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, Alice Walker, Tillie Olsen, Gretel Ehrlich, and Lewis Thomas, who are catalogued under a variety of diverse genre and key word subject headings (1–2). On the contrary, bookstores honor what Elizabeth Hardwick calls “the condition of

unexpressed hyphenation . . . the autobiographical essay, the travel essay, the political—and so on and so on” (xiii), and disperse belletristic essays according to key word categories, Biography (which invariably includes Autobiography), Travel, Social Commentary, and so on.

RHYTHM SECTION #2: *Free Jazz*

STANLEY—HE PLAYS HIS DRUMS, SOMETIMES, AND HE BANGS EM, HE BANGS EM AND HE BANGS EM, HE’LL ROLL EM, BACK AND FORTH AND BACK REAL QUICK WITH A BASE THUMP, AND HE’LL BANG EM AND HIS CYMBALS CRASH AND HISS WHILE HE BANGS EM AND THE BASE THUMPS. And when he does this it’s loud, and the place gets filled, and it feels good, as if you were in your own heart while it was beating.

(Art Greenwood, student)

ESSAY FRAGMENT #2: *I’m Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter*

Some of my essays start out as letters; in fact, one part of this section was a rehearsal for chapter six, “Teaching College English as a Woman.” I write killer letters in my head, letters so powerful they could change the course of history. Letters so romantic they could break up marriages. Letters so devastating they could win megabuck lawsuits, ruin careers, bring powerful men to their knees—or mine. Letters of such rapier elegance they’d make the receivers envious even as they were dying from the effects of my devastating wit. Letters of such sybaritic splendor and escape that I could be a travel agent for Nirvana Airlines. I rehearse these during the strokes of my daily swim, it’s a lot more interesting than counting laps. I revise when I’m driving, and work them over again when I’m cooking, jotting notes to the necessary rhythm of chopping, grinding, beating, simmering, stewing.

With such power coursing through my mind, I have to be careful. For to send these seductive, subversive words as letters to people I know, with real names and zip codes, might be to alter the course of Western Civilization As We Know It. In the days Before Computer, when I was still writing by hand, I started a few letters in my writer’s notebook, but stopped after realizing that some of my best student writers were trapped in their spirals of notebooks, redundant and narcissistic as Nin. For awhile I confided in my computer, fitful fragments.

But once they hit the screen they didn’t look like letters anymore. For example, one set of three entries, written on June 23, 1990, reads:

“Listen to me. You can’t get admitted to graduate school,” said my advisor, known for his research on George Eliot. “Why not?” I asked. “I have a 3.87 and this very department just gave me an award for being their top English major. The catalog says you can get in with a 3.5.” “What it means,” he explained patiently, “is that men can be admitted to the doctoral program with a 3 point. But women need a 4 point. Your grades aren’t good enough.”

\* \* \*

“Trust me,” said the fat obstetrician. “Your baby is ready to be born. I can guarantee that if I induce the baby by 10 a.m on Thursday”—in the process of recopying this, I realize that June 23, 1990—the day I wrote this—was twenty-six years to the day that I was lured into this induction—“he will be born by 2.” “Like dry cleaning,” I thought, “in by 10, out by 2.” So I agreed, all the better to accommodate the doctor’s schedule, and mine. It would be easier to arrange for a daytime sitter for our two-year-old than to summon a neighbor if this baby should come in the middle of the night. What a good girl I was. And what a fool.

\* \* \*

“Believe me,” my mother’s advice punctuated my adolescence at intervals. “Never raise your voice to your husband. If you get angry, don’t say a word. Your father and I have a perfect marriage; we’ve never had an argument in all the years we’ve been married.” She reminded me of this when I finally dared to holler at her last week, for the first time in my life. “Why didn’t you defend my decision to marry Martin, instead of siding with Pop when he disowned me for marrying a Jew?” “Be quiet!” she snapped. “Mother,” I shouted, “you’re confusing manners with morality.” “Don’t raise your voice, young lady. When you’re angry you say things you don’t mean.” “I mean exactly what I say.”

#### WRITING ESSAYS: *In The Mood*

Now I’ll let you in on a secret, though if you yourself are a writer of essays it will come as no surprise. These three paragraphs are not what I wrote on June 23, 1990. Here’s the way the original actually read:

*Beginning for a feminist consciousness essay:*

“Trust me,” said the fat obstetrician. “Have your baby on Thursday like a good girl.” “You have to obey the rule,” said the graduate advisor. “Men can get admitted with a 3 point. Women need a 4 point.” “Believe me,” said my mother at intervals when I was growing up. “Never argue with your husband. If you get angry, don’t say a word.” She reminded me of this during an argument last week. “When you’re angry you say things you don’t mean.”

I had every intention of quoting my journal entry verbatim, but as soon as I knew I’d be writing for an audience I had to make some changes.

I couldn't help myself; for the professional writer there are no private writings, even letters and diaries (see chapter twelve, "I Write for Myself and Strangers': Private Diaries as Public Documents"). Personal essayists rewrite and rewrite and rewrite, in the same ways and for the same reasons that novelists do: to tell a good story, to get the sounds and the rhythm right, to supply sufficient detail for an external reader's understanding, to keep up the momentum, among other things, and especially to get at the essential truth.

Once the germ of an essay hits the paper, or the screen, it becomes simultaneously both more intimate, that is, more revealing, and more detached—that is, more artistically controlled. The raw experience is refined in the telling for the double and very different audiences that Gertrude Stein acknowledged when she said, "I write for myself and strangers." Such refinement is likewise revealed in the very different styles of very different essayists. Hardison notes that these significant differences emerged even as the genre began. Montaigne's essays are indeed "associative, discursive, informal, meandering, slovenly," but the essays of his successor, Bacon, although "inspired by Montaigne's, are, if anything, anti-Montaignian. Especially in their 1597 form, they are aphoristic, staccato, assertive, hortatory, abrasive" (14–15).

Indeed, the writers' painstaking process of revision reveals why essays are neither spontaneous nor improvisatory. (Nor is jazz as improvisatory as it appears to the casual listener, as performers and theorists testify (see Packard, Dean). It's part of the essayist's skill to make the finished work look more or less jazzy—as if it were effortless, free floating, straight from the heart. Much of the essay's wit, and impact, lies in this illusion. Just because an essay sounds personal doesn't mean it is; like the aging Judy Garland, who could cry on cue every time she sang "Over the Rainbow," writers can adapt their personae to just about any occasion, as our friend E.B. White has told us.

Indeed, the essayist's techniques are as varied as those of the fiction writer and, in the hands of a master, their literary artistry is as great. Like fiction writers, essayists can present characters, flat or round, in action, in dialogue (even interior monologue), in context, in costume, in scenes interpreted from a myriad of perspectives. They can play with time, with language, with points of view and narrative personae. Even when essay writers make a serious point, and they often do, they're as likely to argue by indirection—illustration, irony, satire, analogy—as with facts and figures, which themselves seldom appear in straight rows and never in tidy graphs or charts. Here I take issue with Jay Lemke, who in identifying the personal

narrative as “a conventionalized discourse genre,” says that “Its conventions concerning viewpoint, appropriate topics, structural organization, and lexical and grammatical preferences are just as restrictive, rigid, and artificial as those of any genre of technical writing.” This naive view negates the essay’s fluidity and flexibility of form, its wide range of subjects, and ignores as well the creation of personae who might be speaking from perspectives other than the writer’s (28, 31).

Scott Russell Sanders has written two essays about his father, “The Inheritance of Tools,” and “Under the Influence: Paying the Price of My Father’s Booze” that are excellent illustrations of the talented essayist’s ability to shape the subject to suit diverse purposes. Together the pair present a composite portrait, presented in a major and a minor key.

Sanders’s father strides erect through “Tools” as a meticulous craftsman, loving parent, and patient teacher of the carpenter’s many complicated knowledge to his admiring son:

My father would let me lacerate the board until my arm gave out, and then he would wrap his hand around mine and help me finish the cut, showing me how to use my thumb to guide the blade, how to pull back on the saw to keep it from binding, how to let my shoulder do the work.

“Don’t force it,” he would say, “just drag it easy and give the teeth a chance to bite.” (105)

This is the father whose advice is sage, honest, and true: “If you’re going to cut a piece of wood, you owe it to the tree to cut it straight.” From the father’s principled example his son learns the integrity and virtue of doing things right: “There is an unspoken morality in seeking the level and the plumb. A house will stand, a table will bear weight, the sides of a box will hold together only if the joints are square and the members upright” (107).

“Tools” offers not even a hint of the alcoholic father’s “ugly second self” who towers over his cowering family in “Under the Influence,” “terrible in his rage” like the “Old Testament Yaweh.” This is the man, “eyes blazing, voice booming,” who drunkenly twists his wife’s “neck back until she gapes up at him” in “the nightly quarrel,” then “lifts over her skull a glass quart bottle of milk, the milk running down his forearm, and yells at her, ‘Say just one more word, one goddamn word, and I’ll shut you up!’” (15). From his unprincipled example his son, betrayed time after time by this man transformed by drink from “a buddy into a bully,” “a skilled carpenter . . . into a bumbler” (7), learns the shame and the horror of doing things all wrong.

Sometimes in nonfiction—from my own experience as an essayist, often—the actual facts are not only shaped but altered in the name of

art—or, one could argue, in the name of truth. Autobiographical theorists and practitioners are in accord on this point, as anyone knows who has tried to construct—or reconstruct—a dialogue days, even years, after an event when the words were not written down. The best autobiographers recreate the music through whatever words suit the purpose; a literal rendition might kill the spirit of the event or its interpretation. In “Design and Lie in American Autobiography,” Timothy Dow Adams summarizes the current understanding of both critics and autobiographers:

Whether the key terms [design and lie] around which this chapter is organized are taken individually or together, the inescapable conclusion is that each word is complicated, ambiguous, inseparable from other terms, and finally paradoxical. Design, truth, and autobiography collectively name the autobiographical paradox. This form of writing, which may or may not be a genre, possesses a peculiar kind of truth through a narrative composed of the author’s metaphors of self [an allusion to James Olney’s *Metaphors of Self*] that attempt to reconcile the individual events of a lifetime by using a combination of memory and imagination—all performed in a unique act that partakes of a therapeutic fiction making, rooted in what really happened, and judged both by the standards of truth and falsity and by the standards of success as an artistic creation” (3).

Much of the best writing in America today is autobiographical belletristic nonfiction—essays and full-length works—by a host of writers including Judith Ortiz Cofer, Frank Conroy, Annie Dillard, Gretel Ehrlich, Louise Erdrich, Maxine Hong Kingston, Barry Lopez, Nancy Mairs, Richard Rodriguez, Gary Soto, Amy Tan, Geoffrey Wolff, and Tobias Wolff, as well as Scott Russell Sanders. It is not surprising that many of these writers are also novelists, and thereby skilled in using the techniques of fiction in their nonfiction works.

In “Narrative Knowers, Expository Knowledge,” Anne DiPardo presents a spirited defense of the artistry and sophistication of personal essays, in contrast to the “soulless, spineless sort of prose [that students] are commonly led to emulate in the name of ‘exposition.’” Her critique is as telling as the narrative mode she defends: “Whence comes the assumption that depersonalized, disembedded writing [in expository essays] is somehow more intellectually advanced” than is narrative writing? Who “decided that sophisticated expression deletes the expressor, laundering out that idiosyncrasy of voice and perspective that reveals the individual behind the text” (63–64)?

As with jazz, whose high-culture status hardly needs defending these days, writers and astute teachers of essays, in acknowledging the artistry as

DiPardo does, acknowledge the art. Anyone who's ever written essays—not articles—or played jazz understands from the inside out why essays are neither casual *jeux d'esprit*, mere bagatelles, and why they are not second class.

ESSAY-(STILL)-IN-PROGRESS: *Ain't Misbehavin'*,  
OR *It's Labor Day, Happy New Year*

Labor Day is really New Year's Day. Teachers and students, from pre-kindergarten through graduate school, know this in their bones. For the year's major predictable changes come with the major break, summertime. The rest of the year proceeds more smoothly, with holidays occurring at intervals like walnuts in a brownie, pleasant but not disruptive contrasts to the batter matrix. Except for traumas, which never occur on schedule unless you count Christmas.

Labor Day, the end of the rainbow, is the day of resolutions and painful scorekeeping that make January 1 almost irrelevant. And this September, once again, I've flunked, seduced by New England's summer charms. Why did I spend so much time hanging out—yes, that's exactly what it was—with family and friends? And so little time working, preparing for classes, that when school starts tomorrow I won't be ready. I never am.

Labor Day is named only too well as we try to accomplish in twenty-four hours everything we intended to do throughout the summer and put off until now. The days that stretched full-length in the sun, languid and long, from June through August are cut short by the morning's unmistakable chill. The Japanese beetles finally put an end to conspicuous consumption and equally conspicuous sex, leaving the zinnias and black eyed Susans free for a blaze of terminal glory. We make only a cup of hummingbird food at a time, four tablespoons of water to one of sugar, instead of the usual quart, knowing that all too soon the voracious diners will leave our hospitality for their nonstop flight to South America. The sun sets earlier, and we welcome the opportunity to enjoy a phenomeonon I first heard labeled when we lived in Virginia "good sleeping weather." And it is, too. The handmade quilt, kicked to the floor even during the air conditioned nights, is reinstated, and we can overlap without sticking together.

I have been picking and drying herbs for the past six weeks, and today is the day to pack their dessicated fragrance into the glass jars saved since last September for this honor. Every year my husband and I try to give homemade Christmas presents to special people. One year it was sheep potholders, with fleecy backs and tails; we still see their surprisingly bovine visages peering from our friends' kitchens. Another year it was oriental plum sauce,

a rich maroon sweet-and-sour that we also encountered, alas, moldering at the back of a neighbor's refrigerator the following August. Two years ago it was ceramic cooky stamps, with recessed initials or designs to make embossed cookies. My favorite is a pineapple pattern that now stands on little ceramic feet, toes pointed out, on my mother's kitchen windowsill.

This year it will be herbs. Dill seeds. Dill weed. Fennel—we'll have pounds of seeds because we were away when the bulbous vegetable matured, and came home to find the resulting stalks the texture and toughness of bamboo. Sage, it really is sage green. Chives, which dry a delicate brown. Pungent rosemary, though the parent plant will be brought indoors in a tub for the winter. A lobed-leaved plant which we have decided to call marjoram after concluding that it doesn't taste like oregano. Lavender for potpourri and fragrant sheets. Everybody's got mint, so ours will just wait out the winter where it grows behind the toolshed. And three sizes of thyme, the creeping variety drying on cooky sheets beside each telephone. I pull off the tiny leaves during conversations.

My favorite, basil, is harder for me to give away. I could bathe in it. It's easy to understand why Keats's legendary heroine, Isabella, buried her lover's decapitated head in a pot of basil. Watering it every day with her tears, she'd have had to inhale its sweet sexy spiciness, amorous memento of an unconsummated love. Uncorking its delicate glass container reanimates the legend. Pesto is even better, essence of basil enhanced with olive oil, pine nuts, parmesan, and as much garlic as I can sneak in before my husband notices. I make it all summer long by the quart, the kitchen redolent of green sensuousness, and freeze recycled jam jars full. Then comes the moral dilemma. Can I bear to part with any of it? We keep some in the family by giving it to our son and daughter-in-law, happy first anniversary. Another jar goes to an old boyfriend we visit—see what you missed. I decide not to take any to my sister-in-law for our Labor Day cookout, rationalizing that she has her own recipes and likes to make everything her own way. So we take Martin's homemade bread and a pie, rhubarb from our garden. There, in solitary splendor on her gleaming refrigerator door is a recipe for pesto—different from mine.

Now the panic is here. We can't get everything put off all summer done in one day, we can hardly begin. Why did I wait until last week to dry clean the clothes and wash all twenty sweaters that should have spent the summer, dust-free, in mothproof bags? Well, I can skip the bags now that we'll be wearing the clothes soon enough. If they still fit; we inhale in anticipation of the struggle ahead. Maybe we should only look frontways in the mirror. Why didn't we swim more, drive less? Why have we put off reupholstering the couch, insulating the porch, painting the deck? Why



didn't I finish writing the book that I left half-done at the end of last summer, with an ominous September deadline? I only looked at the pile of manuscript to blow off the dust or disentangle the spiderwebs before another batch of friends or relatives arrived to visit us in rural Connecticut. Oh, I read some, wrote some, even taught a couple short courses, always putting off the really big job and now it's too late. If the publisher cancels the contract it will be love's labors lost.

How could I justify taking a vacation with so much undone? The more we aspire to do, the less we seem to finish. If we waited until all the work was done, life would be over before we'd had a vacation. So we went with pleasure to our niece's wedding, and re-met cousins we hadn't seen since our own wedding thirty-two years ago. So I went with four of my best friends from college freshman year to the Maine coast in June, after lunch in New Hampshire with my mother; our visit became a spontaneous three-day symposium on what we wanted from college and life and men thirty-five years ago, and how changing realities affected the fulfillment of those great expectations. So we spent a full four hours at our son's graduation from MIT, snapping his picture on the closed-circuit TV monitor only to realize after the fact that we could have done so, live, from a viewing platform. It didn't matter anyway—we'd forgotten to put film in the camera. So we visited, and hosted, a superabundance of oldest and dearest friends throughout the summer—colleagues from several schools where we've taught; visitors from Nova Scotia, Switzerland, China, Iran; Williamsburg friends with whom we shared a decade of collaborative dinners; former students, metamorphosed into friends and fellow teachers and writers; in-laws new and old, one recuperating from cancer; friends' children now become our friends, with babies of their own.

These are the people who will get the herbs, even the pesto. These are the people who take higher priority than completing the house repairs and writing the book. If I have missed one deadline, I will have kept others of my own choosing. These people are the reason I have waited until the day before classes to begin preparation. But then, I've been preparing for my classes, like my friendships, all the days of my life. To enter that classroom the day after Labor Day will be like meeting friends, old and new, with a mixture of fear and delight, vulnerability and knowledge and passion and hope. I will do all I can to see that we have a happy new year.

TEACHING ESSAYS AS JAZZ: *That's a Plenty*

In the next chapter, I argue that we English teachers should write what we teach. Here I've tried, by example, to make the case that we should

teach what we write, and that understanding the jazz elements of both the compositions and the composing processes should help us generate the music to accompany the words.

Now that you've heard "What I Did on My Summer Vacation" there's not much more to say. I wrote eight drafts of this essay seven years ago to find out whether I could practice what I and Peter Elbow and Jane Tompkins and Susan Leonardi and Rich Murphy and Nancy Sommers and a host of others now preach and give witness to by their example. Some of the ideas have migrated to the "Academic Rhythm" section of chapter ten, "Subverting the Academic Masterplot," where they have been translated into that new context.

Yet I'm not satisfied with this essay, which I continue to regard as a work in progress, especially the ending. I've been tinkering with it intermittently ever since, because I remain troubled by the questions that perennially plague self-critical writers and thoughtful teachers. Is "It's Labor Day. . ." or any personal-sounding essay for that matter, too embedded in trivia, in ephemera to send out in public? Or does it transcend the precious and the personal to address, as I intend, matters of general relevance? Can city folk tolerate its country context—and does this matter? Is it, God forbid, sentimental, or—even worse—solipsistic? Does the resonance of my personal experience interfere with my critical judgment? Is the essay written with sufficient intellectual rigor to ensure clear thinking? coherence? distinguished writing? Do its relaxed language, its sounds and syntax undercut or reinforce its message (see Elbow 1991)? Does the worked-over, revised and re-revised writing in fact retain the flexibility of jazz, the play and interplay, the sounds and the rhythm that reinforce the sense?

Anne DiPardo embeds the answers to all of these questions and more in her brilliant argument for teaching narrative writing in composition classes, "Narrative Knowers, Expository Knowledge: Discourse as Dialectic." Taking as her motif Burke's assertion that "Only those voices from without are effective which speak in the language of a voice within," DiPardo disputes the rhetorical basis for the pedagogical assumption that "prefers abstractions to stories and fails to grasp their dynamic interplay." Writing teachers should perceive narrative and exposition "as poles of a dialectic, with personal experience informing one's interest in abstract knowledge beyond the self, the understanding becoming enlarged as it 'takes in' what is 'out there.'" The best thinking and writing, she says, are concurrently "personal and public, both infused with private meaning and focused upon the world beyond the self." If we deny such narrative

knowing we “rob students of personal meaning; to fail to help them grasp its place in the larger human experience is ultimately to trivialize both” (59, 88).

DiPardo has made explicit what we, as teachers of writing, should understand at “the deep heart’s core.” With this understanding we can not only help our students to write essays as jazz, we can write such essays ourselves. So instead of worrying about how such writing, and such a process, can reach closure, I say, “Let us begin.” Take it again from the top.

## NOTES

1. Nor, for that matter, are the *Confessions* of Montaigne’s countryman, Jean Jacques Rousseau, what they appear to be at first blush, uncontrolled outpourings dictated by the “sensitive heart” of a Romantic who “felt before I thought” (19). Indeed, Rousseau explains that in order to convey the “lively and head-strong emotions” of his “passionate temperament,” he composes in his head, shaping and reshaping paragraphs mentally “for five or six nights before they [are] fit to put down on paper.” He laments, “My blotted, scratched, confused, illegible manuscripts attest to the pain they have cost me” (113–14).
2. In addition to being a prizewinning novelist, Gass is to essays what Joyce is to fiction. See, for instance, any of the essays in *Habitations of the Word*, *The World Within the Word*, or *On Being Blue*.
3. Chef Wolfgang Puck explains the difference between novice and experienced chefs: “Young people are very complicated, very pretentious. It’s a power thing. The more insecure you are, the more complicated and rigid you are. The more secure you get, the more you simplify. Your tastes get simpler and at the same time, more inquisitive, more exotic, more urbane (O’Neill, 64). This is an apt analogy for the major difference between many novice writers of articles, who mask their insecurities with complicated jargon and convoluted syntax, and the free-spirited writers of essays.

See also Levine; and “Music-sound-text-image and the futures of improvisation,” Roger Dean’s discussion of improvisation in the arts, including painting, poetry, films and videos, theatre, electronic production of sounds and images, “poempaintings,” “poetry/talk,” and other blended and blurred genres (177–90).

## *Why Don't We Write What We Teach? And Publish It?*

**W**E TEACHERS OF WRITING SHOULD WRITE LITERARY NONFICTION, assuming that that is what we teach, and we should publish what we write. That's the thesis of this chapter. That not enough of us do this is the subtext. Writing regularly should be as much a part of the teacher's activity as meeting class, and as unremarkable. If that were actually the case, I wouldn't need to write this. Although what I advocate is appropriate for any teachers of writing, freshman English included, it is particularly important that teachers of advanced composition write and publish literary nonfiction. Teachers of advanced courses are more likely than freshman English instructors to be experienced full-time faculty members; and what we do should provide an exemplary model—really, a variety of models—for novice and junior colleagues. If we don't practice what we preach and teach what we practice, what credibility, what authority can we claim?

That creative writing teachers write poetry, plays, fiction, and short stories is a given, as it should be. In most places they're expected to publish, especially if they're teaching advanced students. So why not expect that same of teachers of parallel courses in nonfiction? Aren't the experienced academics who teach advanced composition already publishing? Many are, of course—most likely, academic articles in professional journals. Well and good if, for instance, the professor teaching a course in science writing is publishing in scientific journals. But advanced composition is not necessarily a course in academic writing. Indeed, advanced composition is like love: everybody knows what they mean by the term, few can define it to anyone else's satisfaction, and each practitioner has his or her own way of doing it. Surveys in the 1980s by Bernice Dicks and Priscilla Tate, for instance, indicated an extraordinarily wide range of writing in advanced

composition courses, from the modes of discourse that populate freshman composition; to belletristic nonfiction; to fiction, poetry, and drama; to business, technical, legal, or medical writing in specialized courses on those subjects. Today such courses also encompass building and developing WWW sites, hypertext, and a myriad of other electronic and textual hybrids.

Diverse though they are, these courses nevertheless expect student writers to write and revise a great deal, to be able to write with proficiency in the modes of their discipline, and to become conscious stylists who regard style as integral to the work. In fact, the most commonly used textbooks in advanced composition courses, whose texts range from Homer's *Odyssey* (in translation) to Lewis Thomas's *The Lives of a Cell*, are books on style, including Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* and Zinsser's *On Writing Well* (see Dicks, P. Tate).

It is on belletristic nonfiction writing in which an author expresses a distinctive and individual style that I wish to focus the rest of this essay. We teach a lot of these essays in freshman English—essays by Bacon, Swift, Orwell, Woolf, Baldwin, Didion, E.B. White, McPhee, and a host of contemporary others. We also teach a lot of these essays, or longer books by the same writers, in advanced composition when it is not focused on specialized writing in a single discipline. But although we write articles in academic prose, too few of us write essays in other modes, other language. Too few of us write one or another forms of belletristic nonfiction in a persona, an individual and recognizable style (or combination of styles) that is our own. Too few of us write in ways that engage not only the mind but the heart, that not only teach but delight. Yet if more of us wrote and published belletristic essays, we could enliven and enhance the genre, our teaching, and our profession. And we'd have more fun.

#### ON WRITING ESSAYS

In a country where an aspiring intellectual can still grow up wanting to be a novelist or, rarer still, a poet, nobody wants to be an essayist. Why, indeed, should anyone aspire to write in “this slithery form,” as Elizabeth Hardwick describes it, “wearisomely vague and as chancy as trying to catch a fish in the open hand” (xv)—especially when academic life, where many frustrated writers end up, predicates promotion, tenure, and status on the publication of academic articles? Until very recently, our academic journals, with rare exceptions, have had no space, made no room, for belletristic nonfiction writing.<sup>1</sup> We put these constraints on ourselves; we have met the editors and they are us.

In his brilliant *Textual Power*, Robert Scholes points out that we English professors are terrible snobs. We divide the field into two categories, literature (good, important) and non-literature (trivial, beneath our notice). We can't produce real literature; only geniuses, writing stiffs outside the academy, can do that, we claim. But, says Scholes, to link our academic activities to this "real" writing, we "privilege consumption over production." We call "the proper consumption of literature 'interpretation,' and the teaching of this skill, like the displaying of it in academic papers, articles, and books, is our greatest glory." We can teach students to read this writing, this utilitarian prose which Scholes calls "non-literature." And we teach students themselves to write "unreal versions" of it, which we call "composition." This "pseudo non-literature," produced in an "appalling volume," is at the bottom of the academic totem pole (or scrap heap). And why not? It isn't valued by those who write it, by those who teach it, or by those who employ those who teach it (5–6).<sup>2</sup>

Another way to improve the status of the currently lowly belletristic essay is to try to write it ourselves—though maybe we should wait until we're safely tenured and can afford to take the risk.<sup>3</sup> Literary nonfiction—the belletristic essay is essentially a short version of modes that could be book-length—is harder to write than it looks, because as with any other serious art form, there are no rules, no constraints except one: the work simply has to be true. That's the essential difference between literary nonfiction and fiction. As Annie Dillard explains,

The essay can do everything a poem can do, and everything a short story can do—everything but fake it. The elements in any nonfiction should be true not only artistically, the connections must hold at base and must be veracious, for that is the convention and the covenant between the nonfiction writer and his reader. Veracity isn't much of a drawback to the writer; there's a lot of truth out there to work with. And veracity isn't much of a drawback to the reader. The real world arguably exerts a greater fascination on people than any fictional one. . . . The essayist does what we do with our lives; the essayist thinks about actual things. He can make sense of them analytically or artistically. ("Introduction" xvii)

Yet literary nonfiction can use many of the same techniques that fiction does. It can present characters, from close up or afar, speaking aloud or to themselves, acting, interacting, in scenes, vignettes. It can play with time, tone, structure, language. Literary nonfiction can take many forms, as illustrated by the variety in *Best American Essays*, and in much little magazine nonfiction of the variety published in the vintage *New Yorker*: memoir and partial autobiography; character sketch; travel narrative; natural, cultural,

literary, or social history or criticism; interpretation of a scientific, economic, or political phenomenon for nonspecialists; interpretive reviews that comment at length on the work, the genre, or the performance.

Although we know one when we see one, a belletristic essay is hard to define. It has no fixed length<sup>4</sup>; Graham Good, trying to nail down this slippery term in the Preface of the mammoth *Encyclopedia of the Essay* that attempts to chart the shape and practitioners of the genre, defines *essays* as “nonfictional prose texts of between one and about fifty pages,” but allows that sometimes the term may apply to book-length works (xix). Moreover, the essay has no predictable shape; in fact, as Ian Frazier says, “its diversity may be its most notable characteristic.” The essay, he contends, is now “our most dynamic literary form”—we have met the form and the form is our protean selves. As Frazier notes, “We see narrative essays that seem indistinguishable from short stories. . . . literary criticism with an autobiographical spin, journalism attuned to drama and metaphor, reflection with a heavy dose of information. . . . polemic that sounds like poetry. Physicists, mathematicians, and philosophers are finding that complex ideas and a memorable prose style are not irreconcilable. Even law review articles have turned literary” (xi–xii).

The common denominator among essays, then, is not form, style, length, or subject, but “a strong personal presence,” as Joseph Epstein notes. “This is so even if the essayist never comes out to tell you his view of the matter being discussed. . . . never even slips into the first-person singular. Without that strong personal presence, the essay doesn’t quite exist; it becomes an article, a piece, or some other indefinable verbal construction.” Epstein concludes with a critical truth: “Even when the subject seems a distant and impersonal one, the self of the writer is in good part what the essay is about” (xv). This discussion should dispel two objections faculty often voice against teaching (or allowing) students to write belletristic essays. Isn’t all such writing personal narrative? Obviously, not narrative. Obviously not personal in the sense of autobiographical. Just as obviously, all writing, articles and essays alike, is personal inasmuch as it expresses the mind and passion of the writer. Isn’t belletristic writing intellectually soft, much easier to do than intellectually rigorous academic writing? No more than figure skating is easier to do than hockey, impressionistic painting easier than hard-edge realism.

#### WHAT’S IN IT FOR TEACHERS?

Okay, just because Emerson’s prose was his power (Gass 34), and Gass and other literary hotshots have a gas in writing belletristic essays, what’s in it for *us* as teachers? A lot. Sam Johnson said of biography, “Nobody can

write the life of a man, but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him.” Approaching a work in any literary genre from the outside, as a reader or critic, is very different from living in literary intercourse—Johnson’s well-chosen world of intimacy—with it as a writer. We don’t really understand an essay, or any other form of literature, until we’ve tried to write it.

The most important thing we learn about belletristic writing from doing it is to think like a writer, an essayist in the sense that Dillard, Frazier, and Epstein are talking about, rather than as a critic, an article writer. If we think as writers, we will teach as writers rather than as critics. That is one premise of Scholes’s *Textual Power* and *Text Book*. It is also a major premise of Donald Murray’s beloved book on how to teach writing, *A Writer Teaches Writing*. If Murray’s book had been conceived as *A Teacher Teaches Writing* it would not, could not, have had the same impact. Other beloved books on writing and on teaching writing have been written by people whom Stephen North calls “practitioners,” classroom writing teachers, themselves clearly expert writers, who “by virtue of some combination of eloquence and influence” have attracted “a considerable following” (22). The “eloquence and influence” derive in large part from their engaging books; Walker Gibson’s *Persona and Tough, Sweet, and Stuff*; Ken Macrorie’s *Telling Writing*; Nancie Atwell’s *In the Middle*; Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary*; and the book that would seem the ultimate abdication of authority, Peter Elbow’s *Writing Without Teachers*.

Compare, for instance, how an autobiographer, Annie Dillard, explains what happens during the process of writing an autobiography, with what a critic, Mary Jane Dickerson, says about the same process. In “To Fashion a Text,” Dillard explains:

My advice to memoir writers is to embark upon a memoir for the same reason that you would embark on any other book: to fashion a text. Don’t hope in a memoir to preserve your memories. If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid—eschew—writing a memoir. Because it is a certain way to lose them. You can’t put together a memoir without cannibalizing your own life for parts. The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them. . . . After you’re written, you can no longer remember anything but the writing. (70–71)

In a subsection of “On Writing Autobiography” titled “Constructing Self Through the Dialogic Imagination,” Dickerson says,

Autobiography’s origin as narrative that arises from a dialogue with the self and about the self in relation to others and a particular cultural landscape distinguishes autobiography and makes it especially appropriate for teaching



advanced writing students about the subtle features inherent in the complex act of writing as social discourse. It is a dialogic system of speaking, writing, and reading in which the student writer addresses the self, others, texts, signs, and what goes on in the writer's culture. The element of performance pervades texts as writers voice themselves into being by speaking and behaving from varied perspectives. (137–38)

Although Dickerson is telling teachers of advanced composition what autobiographers do when they write autobiography, I have never in my reading of some three-thousand autobiographies in the past decade seen an autobiographer explain the process in either the critical jargon or the concepts that Dickerson uses. Autobiographers usually claim that they're telling the story of their lives, leaving out some things—Russell Baker says 99.5%—and shaping what remains artistically. In explaining how he wrote *Growing Up*, Russell Baker says:

All the incidents are truthful. A book like that has certain things in common with fiction. Anything that is autobiographical is the opposite of biography. The biographer's problem is that he never knows enough. The autobiographer's problem is that he knows much too much. . . . He knows the whole iceberg, not just the tip. . . . So when you're writing about yourself, the problem is what to leave out. And I just left out almost everything—there's only about half a percent in that book. You wouldn't want everything; it would be like reading the *Congressional Record* (49).

Autobiographers talk about what they do in the natural language that Dillard and Baker use, the same language in which they write their narratives. This is the very language that teachers who have tried writing autobiography would use to explain the process to their students. In fact, Dickerson herself uses much clearer, simpler language in the questionnaires she gives to her students (144–46). Might she herself have written autobiography—her article, with its strict focus on teaching, gives no clue. Teachers who write in the modes they're teaching become natural allies with their students writing in the same modes, rather than, as Scholes says in *Textual Power*, acting as “priests and priestesses in the service of secular scripture” and expecting students to worship in critical jargon at the altar of the “verbal icon” (12).

Among the belletristic writer's major concerns are form and style (those staples of advanced composition) and the endless possibilities of each in conveying the exact angle of vision, the precise nuance of meaning. Because belletristic writing is a more fluid medium than academic article writing, it is open to continuous experimentation with form. As Dillard

says in “To Fashion a Text,” “No subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed. You get to make up your own form every time” (74).

So you experiment. Here’s how a person, myself in this instance, might think about two writings—one academic, the other belletristic—on the same topic: the importance of friendship. In an academic article, I’d buttress an explicit thesis about the subject in general with references ranging, probably in chronological order, from Plato to Elizabeth Barrett Browning to George Bernard Shaw to Virginia Woolf, duly annotated. In pursuit of irrefutable logic, adequate development, credibility, balance, and fairness, I’d consult other published scholarly sources, too, from philosophy, psychology, sociology, women’s studies. My own views, as exposition and argument, would emerge in juxtaposition with those of my sources, and I’d come to an explicit conclusion. Because the overall form of an academic article is fairly circumscribed—its shape accommodating norms of the discipline and even of specific journals—the experimentation would probably be on a micro rather than macro level. I would move, expand and delete paragraphs, sentences, and phrases for variety, emphasis, and elegance, but I would not alter the larger structure unless it were illogical or couldn’t be supported.

I can see many more possibilities of form in a belletristic essay on friendship, a subject I’ve been approaching and avoiding for a decade—my usual gestation time. My aim is to present an extended definition of friendship, illustrating general principles through specific details. The essay could contain a collage of vignettes, each illustrating a different aspect of a significant friendship I’ve had, long term and short, with women and men, with my husband and others, with children, grandchildren, grandparents, and students metamorphosed into peers. (Parents are tougher.) It could contain excerpts from personal letters, snatches of conversation (the remembered essence, not word-for-word), definitions formal and operational (perhaps from some of the same sources that I’d use in an academic article), brief analyses of others’ friendships, real and literary, to juxtapose with my own, epigrams, fragments of biography, autobiography. I’d expect to use all of the above and more that I still haven’t thought of yet, with the vignettes embedded in a matrix of the other materials, as Joan Didion does in “Marrying Absurd,” with accounts of three characteristic Las Vegas weddings: the speedy judge who compresses the conventional ceremony from five minutes into three; the drunken bride rushing to perform in “the midnight show”; and the oddly formal wedding of innocents who confuse the accessories (formal clothes and pink champagne) with the ceremony. I would be less concerned with logic than with the essential truth. A chronological organization of material

wouldn't make much sense; maybe a psychological pattern would work best, from the least intense experience to the most profound. Or perhaps a framework that led from the more generally applicable to the most individual. Or some other way. Implicit in the process would be the recognition that I'd know it when I wrote it, but not before. As E.M. Forster says, "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?"

What about style? Every writer, except a committee or a corporate author, has an identifiable style, even an "opaque" style celebrating "the joys of obfuscation," in Richard Lanham's term. I'd write any academic article in a style compatible with the one I'm using here, though less breezy for a very stuffy editorial board.<sup>5</sup> But that's because, unlike my professorial peers, I learned my literary style not from M. Derrida but from Dr. Spock, the Strunk and White of baby book authors, as I explain in chapter eleven, "Coming of Age in the Field That Had No Name." I'd try for a persona that appears knowledgeable, intellectually sophisticated, honest, positive, witty, and likeable—and hope that it also seemed credible. To the extent that I could get away with conversational language, I'd use it, varying the length and structure of sentences and paragraphs. I'd write in the first person, where it sounded good. I'd use contractions, sometimes. Even fragments. I'd break the rules, as Orwell advises, "sooner than say anything outright barbarous." Unlike far too many academic writers and journal editors, I'd eschew critical jargon, especially trendy language, which I do not wish to valorize, whatever the pretext, in texts, subtexts, or intertexts. I am egotistical enough to want the readers of all my writing to wish they'd thought of saying it my way, and I'd use a similar style, perhaps a tad more casual, in a belletristic essay. There, given the subject of friendship and my first-person point of view, I'd worry about sentimentality. As Dillard says in defense of nonfiction prose,

Like poetry, [it] can tolerate all sorts of figurative language, as well as alliteration and even rhyme. The range of rhythms in prose is larger and grander than it is in poetry, and it can handle discursive ideas and plain information as well as character and story. It can do everything. I feel as though I had switched from a single reed instrument [writing poetry] to a full orchestra. ("Fashion" 74–75)

Most of all, I'd listen to the sounds and the rhythm. If the writing didn't move, didn't read well, I'd do it over. And over again. (You are reading the sixteenth draft—four written in updating this essay for publication in this book.)

Finally, I'd have my husband, who is my best critic as well as best friend, read and critique it. Then a trusted colleague, or for a belletristic essay, a

friend who is an avid and thoughtful reader—including some of my former students (now friends) who understand the genre from the inside out. I'd revise the essay, let it sit quietly for awhile to ripen like a good Camembert, then revise it again (would *peach* work better than *Camembert? fine wine?* certainly not *banana*) and prepare to send it out for publication. But where? Probably not *The New Yorker*—John McPhee said he submitted everything he wrote to *The New Yorker* for over a dozen years before they finally accepted something. I know several superb writers who have been submitting their work in vain to *The New Yorker* for longer than that, and their lack of success scares me. Where else? *Harper's* or *The Atlantic*? Same story. Little magazines, such as *Creative Nonfiction*? Maybe. There appear to be enough to go around.

But I'd like to talk to my fellow teachers. In 1990, I wrote that I'd like to be able to pick up *College English* or *College Composition and Communication* or *JAC* and find in them belletristic essays of the kind that we talk about in class and use as exemplary models. At the time I asked, would not the publication of literary nonfiction in the very journals devoted to academic articles on the same subject validate this kind of writing as no other sort of acknowledgment could do? And I argued that to exclude such writing would be to reinforce the inverted values Scholes takes to task in *Textual Power*, values that reinforce consumption at the expense of production.

For composition studies journals to publish creative nonfiction, I observed, could have the same legitimating effect on essays that would occur if *PMLA* were to publish an article on composition research. Likewise, I argued, every professional meeting devoted to composition, such as CCCC, WPA, the Penn State conference, the national and regional conventions of NCTE, and the like, ought to have sessions devoted to the reading of belletristic writing, not just by literary superstars, but by members of the organizations that are meeting. So I began to submit creative nonfiction to professional meetings, journals, books; that the editors published my work (see chapters one, six, ten, eleven, sixteen, and eighteen) and comparable pieces by Linda Brodkey, Nancy Sommers, Victor Villanueva, Rich Murphy, and Brenda Brugemann—among many others—signified a major expansion of the boundaries of the field.

The fact of publication not only validates such work, any work, but professionalizes the writer as an author. Publishing authors learn what types of material editors of different publications are looking for, how the process of editing and revising for publication works and how rigorous it must be, and—eventually—when to accommodate an editor's suggestions

and when to insist that their way is best. Through dealing with these concerns, over and over and over again, the publishing writer develops that self-critical facility so essential in enabling a novice, student or any writer, to move from amateur to professional status, as Gesa Kirsch explains in *Women Writing the Academy*. Teachers who revise and submit their own work for publication have earned the right to expect their students to do the same.

#### WHAT'S IN IT FOR STUDENTS?

Isn't it our job, our mandate, as Bizzell (1982, but see also 1988), Bartholomae (1985), and others have argued, to induct our students into the academy by teaching them to write academic papers in academic discourse? Isn't that why they have to take freshman English? And even upper level writing courses? If they can't write acceptable papers in their courses in other disciplines, won't it be our fault if we haven't taught them how to do it?

Yes and no. There is general agreement that we teach composition at any level to help students think, read, and write critically and well. We have an obligation, therefore, to fulfill this agreement, and if we don't we're at least partly responsible for the consequences. But there is considerable variation in what those terms mean to the authors of the plethora of existing composition textbooks, and those that sprout like daisies on the publishers' lists of newcomers every spring, attesting anew to the fact that there is no single right way to teach writing.

W. Ross Winterowd in "Rediscovering the Essay," says that "students should have the right *not* to be conclusive—as they must in formal essays—but rather to *explore* themselves and their worlds in informal essays" (146). Peter Elbow, among others, argues that it is undesirable to teach freshman to write exclusively in academic discourse. "Life is long and college is short," he says in "Reflections on Academic Discourse." Students write academic prose only in college but very different kinds of writing on their jobs. Writing courses should encourage students to write what's meaningful to them, so they'll be "more likely to write by choice" outside of the courses, and able to do so. Chances are that voluntary writing won't be academic discourse. Rather, it will be writing, perhaps autobiographical—the kind that Winterowd is talking about, that enables students to *render* experience, as most of the belletristic texts we teach in English courses do, rather than to *explain* it, the focus of nearly all other disciplines. "To render experience," says Elbow, "is to convey what I see when I look out the window, what it feels like to walk down the street or fall down the street or fall

in love—to tell what it’s like to be me, to be me or to live my life.” Moreover, the ability to write good nonacademic discourse will help students translate the academic discourse of their textbooks “into everyday, experiential, anecdotal” language that they can understand and use (“Reflections” 136).

Elbow expands his argument to say that it’s impossible to teach academic discourse anyway, because “there’s no such thing.” “Biologists don’t write like historians,” and even in English there is no single discourse community, but a variety ranging from “the bulldozer tradition of high Germanic scholarship” to the “genial slightly talky British tradition” (of belletristic essays) to “poststructuralist, continental discourse: allusive, gamesome—dark and deconstructive.” Add to these the discourses of quantitative research, qualitative research, psychoanalytic and psychological interpretation. What is central to all kinds of academic discourse, says Elbow, is “the giving of reasons and evidence rather than just opinions, feelings, experiences: being clear about claims or assertions rather than just implying or insinuating; getting thinking to stand on its own two feet rather than leaning on the authority of who advances it or the fit with who hears it.” And this is a major goal of schooling and literacy (135–40).

So we return to the possibility, as well as the desirability of teaching belletristic essay writing, plain good discourse in general, as well as doing such writing ourselves. Such writing enables our students to find their own voices instead of ventriloquizing in an academic voice that lacks authority. We can see the results in the collections of Bedford prize student essays and other published student writing. Students take their writing seriously because they are invested in it; such investment makes them willing to write and rewrite and rewrite again. They become, with us, members of a community of writers, as chapters one and four of this book amply demonstrate. (This alternative anticipated Spellmeyer’s position in “A Common Ground: The Essay in the Academy,” in which he argues that we as teachers should “permit our students to bring their extra-textual knowledge to bear upon every text we give them, and to provide them with strategies for using this knowledge to undertake a conversation which belongs to us all” 119.) In addition to talking critically about belletristic writing, students and teachers alike who try writing it learn to understand it from the “deep heart’s core”—a profound stance, for readers and for writers.

## NOTES

1. One could argue that the plethora of a little magazines, on campus and off, provide plenty of opportunity for publishing belletristic writing. That argument is beside the point unless we subscribe to these and read them regularly. C'mon now, fess up! How many little magazines do you read—regularly? How many have you read in the past five years? Have you ever submitted an essay to one? Of course, one could ask the same questions about *PMLA* and expect the same dismal answers.
2. Scholes's solution to this problem is not to invert the hierarchy, but to deconstruct the binary oppositions between literature and non-literature, production and consumption, real world and academy. Ultimately this will result in teachers enabling students to respond to literary texts with texts of their own. We must, says Scholes, help our students unlock textual power and turn it to their own uses. . . . We must help them to see that every poem, play, and story is a text related to others, both verbal pre-texts and social sub-texts, and all manner of post-texts including their own responses, whether in speech, writing, or action. The response to a text is itself always a text. Our knowledge is itself only a dim text that brightens as we express it. That is why expression, the making of new texts by students, must play a major role [in freshman composition]. (20)  
Scholes, Comley, and Ulmer's *Text Book* demonstrates the range of texts the students can write, empowered by this philosophy and creative latitude.
3. Chris Anderson defends this position: "As someone struggling to gain professional accreditation, someone with a desire to write, someone trying to understand the important—and exciting—questions generated by contemporary criticism, someone who has published some scholarly articles and had others rejected, I find the essay an increasingly compelling model. The acceptance of second-class citizenship in exchange for freedom of movement is beginning to strike me as a pretty good bargain" (307). Anderson's ideas are first-rate; he shouldn't settle for "second-class citizenship."
4. The five-paragraph theme is not an essay, except in the state of New Jersey, where the five-paragraph theme is required writing in mandated testing of senior high school students, whose scores are lowered if they do not follow its rigid format of an introductory paragraph, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion. In practice, this format is really a heuristic device, a formula to elicit an allegedly linear thought pattern. Students (and teachers) who confuse format with form imperil their writing, as we know from reading formulaic, often inane, papers which use it. What's a "body paragraph," anyway?
5. In fact, I'm writing this article in a more casual, insouciant style, signaled by the two rhetorical questions in the very title, than I'd usually employ in academic writing because I want to make the point that it can be done. And that an academic journal will publish it. But that's risky—maybe they won't.

## *Subverting the Academic Masterplot*

### TEACHERS' TALES—THE MASTERPLOTS

Teachers' tales out of school, the stories we love to hear, seem to have two basic masterplots, both with happy endings. Plot One shows the teacher-as-practitioner playing the role of what North calls "television doctor." In this "miracle-cure scenario" (46) the teacher is confronted with a new, or chronic, problem that defies solution. This mystery malady infects the entire class or individual students, who for unfathomable reasons can't master the requisite skills or learn the lessons du jour. The tortured teacher, who has previously leapt all problems with a single bound, is stymied. She paces and ponders, buttonholing colleagues with the Problem That Will Not Die.

Picture, for example, Mina Shaughnessy "sitting alone in the worn urban classroom" where her "severely underprepared" freshmen have "just written their first essays." In astonishment and despair, the Master Teacher ponders their "stunningly unskilled" writing. However, unable even to "define the task" or "sort out the difficulties," she can "only sit there, reading and re-reading the alien papers, wondering what had gone wrong and trying to understand what [she] at this eleventh hour of [her] students' academic lives could do about it" (vii).

The universe is out of step until the teacher through accident or intention stumbles on a solution, trying first one, then another remedy until fortune favors the prepared mind and—voilà! The miracle cure is at hand. *Errors and Expectations* metamorphoses into *Great Expectations*; Shaughnessy now has "no difficulty assessing the work to be done nor believing that it *can* be done" (vii). The students' problems are solved; "Oh, Dr. [Shaughnessy], this is so much better! How can I ever thank you" [North 46]. Other teachers are inspired; Shaughnessy's ragtime band marches on in triumph.

Although Plot Two might be considered a variation of Plot One, for it too ultimately has a miracle cure, this version is inspired by the Book of Job instead of the Book of Mina. In this story, for whatever reasons, the



class begins to deteriorate; students and teacher are either marching to different drummers, or else not marching at all. Unless a Dramatic Change happens in a hurry—prompted by the teacher’s agonizing reappraisal, the students’ spontaneous turnaround, or some form of *deus ex machina*, the class is doomed to entropic disaster. The teacher, formerly arrogant in her confidence that she can work miracles, has been thoroughly humbled by forces greater than she. The dark night of the soul infects students and teacher alike; Dostoyevsky reigns in a Kafkaesque universe.

But wait! The Dramatic Change does in fact happen, and redemption, resurrection, are at hand. Teacher and students have learned An Important Lesson together and, sadder but much much wiser, have achieved Victory Against Great Odds. Praise the Lord; the beat goes on. I myself have structured “Finding a Family, Finding a Voice” (chapter one) according to this plot, which tells how my course in “Teaching Composition” for new TAs had become an unstructured, off-balance response to a crisis (no textbooks, students who themselves were not teaching). In this weekly guerilla theater, by sharing my own risk-taking writing-in-progress (a very personal, very exploratory version of “Why I Write”), I and the students effected a paradigm shift. “In the twinkling of an eye,” I wrote, “my class metamorphosed from students in the process of learning about teaching in order to teach writing, to students in the process of becoming writers in order to teach writing” (15).

We live by these masterplots; they exalt every valley and make the rough places plain. These are the success stories that, in one form or another, teachers love to hear, and live to tell. But the story I am finally able to disclose to you here, nearly two decades after the dismal events, fits neither of these ultimately exhilarating plots. It is the story of the worst course I ever taught, the worst teaching I’ve ever done, the most students who didn’t stay the course—and right they were. Since even the greatest of teachers must have dwelt in Disaster City on occasion, I assume that such stories are legion, buried in the secret files of our minds. Like accounts of illegal abortions, these seldom attain the public status of lore or legend—and when they do, they happen to someone else.

Well, this one happened to me, with my unwitting—indeed eager—complicity. It is, at best, a cautionary tale of some of the bad things that can go wrong when a course and a teacher and a class and a curriculum inadvertently conspire to subvert the academic rhythm of a semester, flexible and forgiving, by trying to cram what should have occurred over fifteen weeks into a five-day summer session. Eighteen months ago, when I began to write this, I continued to attribute all the difficulties to the

course's truncated time frame. But no longer. As I have been writing this I have come to understand that yes, the compressed format provided insurmountable constraints, but these were exacerbated by my own ignorance. I was a stranger in strange lands, in a university new to me, in an unfamiliar school (of Education) with its own (and to this English professor) strange culture, trying to introduce new doctoral students to a new discipline which neither they nor I could have mastered in a week's time. The redemption from this disaster lies in the warning I offer here.

#### ACADEMIC RHYTHM

I live by the generous rhythm of the academic year. Martin and I, already wedded to the semester system, were married during the shimmering legato of a summer vacation between master's and doctoral study. Our children were born during summer vacations. We've always moved—for new academic jobs—during summer vacations. Indeed vacations, particularly summer's three capacious months and the punctuation of Christmas break, which always moves presto, no matter how many calendar days actually allocated, serve a myriad of academic purposes. For vacations make possible the time out of time—an increasingly rare luxury in today's downsized, outsourced, overstressed workaday world—that provides the steady heartbeat for the entire academic year; the opportunity to read, write, do research, reinvent old courses and create new ones.

Summer school courses disrupt two sets of natural academic rhythms, the summer's stately pace and the semester's measured tempo. Attempts to adapt the semester's customary pace to summer school's double, or triple, time may work in courses that consist primarily of reading as the way of learning—students can read more, or read faster. Or they can read less. Or teachers can expect less, although I am in Shaughnessy's camp and teach with great expectations, in all seasons.

Indeed, I've found that the summer school mode most conducive to student learning without compromise on my part is the intensive workshop format, such as that used in the numerous sites of the National Writing Project, and in the Martha's Vineyard Summer Workshops. The long days, happy nights where students can get to know and work (and yes, play) with one another, the built-in two to three day breaks (good for library or field work and major writing), are supplemented by an extra month after the course ends so the students can complete an extensive term project. This schedule gives the students, mostly full-time teachers themselves, ample time to read widely, to reflect, to engage in various

modes of research, to write, and to revise—maybe even more than an ordinary semester would allow.

Perhaps it was three satisfying summers of teaching in a National Writing Project's five-week intensive workshop format that led me to accept an invitation from Prestige U to teach a summer school course, "Research I, Introduction to Research Methods." Those summers of team teaching with an Ed School colleague and a veteran high school English curriculum supervisor, as well as the Writing Project participants, smart and energetic, led me to believe I understood, even shared, the school-teachers' view of the composition studies universe.

"You can use whatever time frame you want," offered the dean's henchperson, "three times a week for the entire summer, every day for six or eight weeks, half-days for two weeks, or," when I still did not answer, "full days plus some evenings for a week." Even the anemic salary, crunched into a single week, appeared robust. So I leapt like a trout at the one-week format—the one most congruent with our family's summer plans. That this format proved totally uncongenial to every principle of teaching and learning that works well in a semester format should have been no surprise to me or to the sponsoring institution, for that matter, especially in the bailiwick—devoted to the study of education—where I was to teach.

A similar—so I believed—course had been the capstone of my own formal doctoral study at another even more prestigious university—required of all students not the moment they entered the program but after they'd passed the doctoral prelims. Its virtue lay in the enforced opportunity to write one's dissertation prospectus, and to rewrite it dramatically, under supervision, every week for fifteen weeks until we got it right. As a consequence of innumerable visions and revisions the project, always intellectually interesting, became doable, elegant, and refined—and of course refined and adapted again many times during the actual research. "No problem to condense that course," I thought, for at the time I had never met a course I couldn't teach, "as long as I can plan it thoroughly in advance." A meticulous syllabus would see me through.

#### ALIEN NATION

I had come, fresh from the country, to the holy city of Byzantium on a blazing July Sunday afternoon loaded, I thought, for bear. I had already sent ahead a syllabus, detailed hour-by-hour, and a stack of journal articles to be photocopied as the required reading.

My under-ventilated undergraduate dorm room, windows sealed shut, and accessible only by elevator and a fistful of keys, was home away from home. It reeked of eau de Big Mac and throbbed around the clock with heavy metal pulsations. When I finally fell asleep, they even penetrated the anxiety dream that reliably precedes each semester. This one differed from the usual in which I'd forgotten my books, or syllabus, or critical article of clothing—only to discover its absence when I faced the students and opened my book bag—or took off my coat. In this one, however, the dean called me the night before class was to start to say that he'd changed my assignment. Instead of teaching composition I was to teach calculus. "But I don't know anything about teaching calculus," I responded. "You can *read*, can't you?" he thundered. "Just pick up the book and go to class and read faster than the students."

On Monday morning I arrived a half hour early at the frigid seminar room which the class was to meet from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. for the next five days, to find several students there already. Greying and grave, they eyed my cotton shift and sandals with calculated impassivity. I began to shiver but here, too, the windows were sealed shut.

The early arrivals' not-so-casual conversation made their agenda very clear. "Our own schools have recently let out. We're glad to be here for only a week; it won't interrupt the rest of the summer very much," said a woman in a twin sweater set and pearls. "With Prestige's evening and summer courses we can teach full-time and still work on our degrees. And of course we expect As," spoken with a smile. "We're entitled to As," quickly added another, whose navy suit and pumps signaled a person accustomed to Being in Charge—whether of a classroom, a department, or an entire school didn't matter. "Admission to the doctoral program automatically guarantees this." There was no smile. What did an A here mean, I wondered. Were As in fact a doctoral entitlement? Well, they'd have to do the work, and then we'd see.

By 8 a.m. the room, designed for twenty, was crowded with double that number around the seminar table—an astonishing enrollment even for a required course. "Let's get acquainted," I chirped. "You don't know me"—how could they when I had no reputation at that school as a teacher, nor anywhere as a researcher in the field of education. "You can call me Lynn, and I'd like to call you by your first names."

"Here we call our professors by their titles and they call us by ours," shot a slender, bearded young man in jeans. His glittering eye fixed on mine. "You *are* Doctor, aren't you?"

Ordinarily I'd have joked, "Not a *real* doctor." That morning I simply said "Yes. A Ph.D."

“My name is Mister Barber, A.B.D., and I want to know why you don’t have an Ed.D. This is a School of Education and an Ed.D. is our normative degree.”

“What’s the difference?”

“*You* should know.”

Even though he shouldn’t have asked, he was right. I should have known that as the creation of an English Department, my understanding of the meaning of research was very different from that of the Ed School faculty and students. Research in English—at least in the research institution from which I had come—was theoretical rather than applied; text-oriented, not classroom-based; qualitative rather than quantitative; analytic rather than descriptive. When I’d taught a comparable course to English grad students we always skipped the math to cut to the humanities chase—theory; philosophy; rhetorical analysis; case studies replete with character, plot, and resolution. I recognized that *CCC* and *RTE* of the time revealed very different research paradigms, but since I’d never had a doctoral student in Education before, I’d never had to figure out why.

As I distributed photocopy after photocopy, other questions began. Most of the students, I had been told before I came, were newly admitted to the doctoral program. All that I knew about Prestige’s expectations of the course came from the catalog description. I told them, “*Research* I will be, as the catalog explains, your introduction to the specialized professional literature and to the methodology of composition studies research. Because the scope of this course, like many that focus on the state-of-the-art in any field, exceeds that of the existing textbooks, I—and you—will have to do a lot of talking to integrate the journal articles I’ve brought. Stories about our teaching experiences can make important connections.”

I ventured a smile at the noncommittal faces. “As you can see by the syllabus”—I felt as if I were droning on, even though the class had been in session less than five minutes, “we’ll be spending half-day segments on overviews of some of the major methodologies of composition studies research, as represented by well-known, well-regarded studies in the field. We’ll look at methods ranging from teacher lore and teacher-as-researcher to case histories; to clinical research emphasizing small and large group studies, short- and long-term; to assessment of reading and writing. Because the field, new as it is, is changing so fast, these methods are exemplified primarily in the journal articles I’m giving you.”

This scheme anticipated a combination of the topic areas and procedures of North’s *Making of Knowledge in Composition* and White’s *Teaching and Assessing Writing*. Indeed, had these books been available at the time—

along with Lauer and Asher's *Composition Research: Empirical Designs*, Tate's bibliographic overview, and alternative paradigms to North, such as Kirsch and Sullivan's *Methods and Methodology in Composition Research* and Gere's *Into the Field*—the course—even in a one-week format—might have been manageable.

It occurred to me as I was talking that I should have asked a Prestige faculty member what the course usually covered. Now, even if the map I had prepared was inadequate to navigate this unknown territory, it was already too late to change. So I soldiered on. "As you can see from the syllabus, this course, short though it is, will culminate in a term project that requires you to conceptualize and design a research project. With luck, it will prove to be a model for your dissertation research."

The class erupted with questions. "How much time do we have after this week is up to turn in our papers?" "Would three months be enough—by mid-October?" I replied. "I'd like to allow some turnaround time so I can comment on a preliminary draft." "Our annual bonuses depend on the grades being turned in before Labor Day"—what I saw by then would be all I'd get. "How long do the papers have to be?" My usual answer, "Write until you've said what you have to say and then stop" would hardly suffice. "How many outside sources do we have to use?" How could I answer that when I didn't know what they were writing on? "Where can we find them?" "What are the summer library hours? Is it open on Sundays?" I didn't even know where the library was. "What else will our grades be based on?" Attendance and class participation seemed too juvenile for this obviously mature group. There would be no time for them to prepare reading-response notebooks or literature reviews during the week we were meeting, and it would be hard—in these days B.C.E. (Before Computer E-Mail)—to collect and respond to such work once we left campus. "I'll . . . I'll have to let you know."

During these preliminaries I became aware of considerable rolling of the eyes among Mr. Barber and two other bluejeaned peers. And then it hit me. What was an A.B.D. doing in this course for new doctoral students? I could have asked, but the answer—any answer—would only create complications. We were going to stick to the syllabus, by God, so that I, at least, could stay afloat for the week.

And so we did, at least on Day One. Contrary to my preferred format of interactive class discussion interspersed with small breakout groups focusing on particular issues, I did most of the talking—all morning about writing process research, all afternoon about issues of language teaching and linguistic research. The strict constructionists, ardent champions of current

traditional grammar, listened with distant politeness to my explanations of other systems of grammar—structural, transformational, formal and informal. Then they asked, “But how can the pupils do sentence combining properly if they don’t label the parts of speech?” “Why should we bother with deep structure when the students already have trouble diagraming the surface structure?”

“You’ll be better able to answer those questions tomorrow morning,” I said, wondering if my own sentences were still coherent after eight hours of practically nonstop speech. I continued, “after you’ve read the Chomsky material tonight.”

The class jerked to attention. “What reading tonight?” asked Mrs. Sanders, a woman whose take-charge manner pegged her as a principal.

“What’s on the syllabus, of course.”

“Doctor Bloom,” she enunciated with precision, “You need to understand that most of us have a long drive to get here in the morning, and we’ll be going home in the rush hour. We have other responsibilities once we’re there. There’s no way we can read a dozen articles a night, let alone absorb them. Especially,” she added, “when we already have a backlog of today’s articles that no one could read in advance.”

She added, “Just tell us the two most important ones and we can at least skim those.”

“Every single reading is important,” I replied. “Every single reading deals with a different aspect of the field, and every single hour of the day’s lectures is predicated on your knowledge of the readings. Except,” I paused, trying to calm down, “Wednesday afternoon when another lecturer will run all of us through the boot camp basics of statistics”—concepts I barely remembered from the single undergraduate course I’d taken fifteen years earlier: ANOVA, Beta weights, Chi squares, Likert scales, multiple correlation, one and two-tailed statistical tests, threats to internal validity, and Type I and Type II errors. “You won’t need to be able to do the actual math at this stage,” I offered, “but knowing the terminology will help you read the research articles.” Which they weren’t about to do.

“Well,” I finally said, as the silence continued, “if you have to choose, start with Elliott Mishler’s ‘Meaning In Context: Is There Any Other Kind?’ It’s just come out and it will help to make sense of everything else you read. And the photocopied section of Emig’s *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders*. We’ll be discussing narrative research methods in the afternoon.”

“Such as . . .” asked Mr. Barber.

“Oh, teacher stories focusing on practical wisdom and teacher-as-researcher, some interviews, and case histories, mostly.”

“Anything else?” he persisted, his gaze unflinching.

What was he driving at? “We’ll take it up tomorrow.” The students talked among themselves—but not to me—and surged into the steaming summer sunset.

#### THE COOKED AND THE RAW

The next morning I began with “What are good research questions?” in hopes of warming up the room, which was even colder than the preceding day. “How do we know they’re good?” “How could a question be translated into a workable research design—say, for your term papers?” “Excuse me,” offered a middle-aged woman who had taken notes nonstop on Monday. “My name is Mrs. Miller. This is my first doctoral course. You just gave us the syllabus yesterday, and we haven’t had a chance to read much.” She looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry, but I can’t answer your question responsibly until I’ve done more reading and thinking. At the moment I haven’t a clue about what would be a good question to ask—or a bad one. Until now I’d never thought about research designs, ever. How can I invent one out of thin air?”

“You’re right,” I began, ignoring the groans of Mr. Barber and his two pals. “It’s not possible for someone new to research, no matter how experienced you are as a teacher or writer”—I smiled and she smiled back—“to understand at the outset the research issues and models that you’re here to learn about. This five-day seminar will just scratch the surface.”

As I spoke, the import of these words began to sink in. How, indeed, in this brief span of time could the students even learn enough terminology, let alone the research literature in their chosen area—whatever that was to be—well enough to join in the ongoing dialogue in the academic parlor, as Kenneth Burke envisioned? Even when they did find a research focus they’d need to let the ideas marinate long enough to make them their own. Would it be possible to devise a workable research design at this stage of their graduate study? Any design would predictably require a number of revisions, and consultations in connection with each one. Even with express mail this would be a stretch to accomplish at long-distance. But the entire course was built around this task.

“I’ll try to confer individually with everyone this week, and we can at least map the terrain.” Where would the extra twenty-five hours come from in the next three days to make good on this desperate promise?

“Well, I know what I’m going to do,” announced a pretty peroxide blonde. “In my experience rule-oriented grammar drill is the best way to teach students to write well. My students always ace the SATs, and their



newspaper—I'm the advisor—has won state awards three years in a row." Her crimson smile was triumphant. "In fact," she asserted, "Drilling the rules is the *only* good way to ensure that students will write properly. My term paper will prove I'm right. That paper will be the basis of the thesis that my dissertation research will prove." Several of her peers nodded in approval. "What a wonderful subject," said one, ignoring my surprised silence.

I couldn't imagine that Prestige would let its students investigate an issue that even at the time had been thoroughly discredited. However, there were already so many things I hadn't anticipated at Prestige that I asked, "So what else do you think would be good term paper topics?"

"What about an ethnographic study?" interposed Mr. Barber.

My hesitation did not escape his notice. What was "ethnography"? I was as startled to hear this unfamiliar term as I had been when someone complimented me at a professional meeting for having done "a pioneering study in protocol analysis"—a method so unusual at the time that it had no label. Mr. Barber had me exactly where he wanted—up against the wall. With no context, I hadn't a clue. I took a deep breath and said, "What's ethnography?"

"You don't know what ethnography is? Well, let me tell you. We've"—he gestured toward his two companions—"just finished a research course in ethnographic methodology with Shirley Brice Heath." Her early innovations and methodological sophistication had yet to appear in *Ways With Words*, the transformative work that would make ethnographic research as standard a tool in schools of education as it was in anthropology; it would later win her a MacArthur "genius" award. "We can't do our doctoral research with her because she's moving to Stanford. But we signed up for this course to lay out the groundwork for our dissertations. If we get the methodology worked out this summer we can do our classroom fieldwork in the fall. But you," his face reddened with anger, "you don't even know what ethnography is. I didn't pay eight hundred fifty dollars in tuition for this course to listen to low-level grammar projects. I know how to do statistics. And I can't stand your silly stories"—telling stories was for me even then as natural as telling the truth.

"Why don't you drop the course?" I could hardly get the words out.

"I've tried. There's some rule that the registrar won't waive."

"I'm sure if you hold your ground you'll get a refund." Mr. Barber and his two colleagues quickly stuffed the day's photocopies into their bookbags and marched out. "If anyone else wishes to leave, please go now." My words reverberated in the frozen air.

No one moved, but I knew that from then on the course was irredeemable. I would never be able to regain the authority that for Mr. Barber and associates I had never held in the first place. I would like to be able to say that with the malcontents' departure the course immediately shifted into the overdrive I work for in all my classes—high energy, low friction, full speed ahead.

But when I try to recollect the particulars of the rest of that very long week it is as if I had been anesthetized. Through memory's translucent scrim the course topics, the visiting statistician, the students pass in slow motion, with the sound turned off. I am giving lectures no one can hear, holding soundless conferences with every student before class, during lunch, late in the afternoon, throughout each exhausting evening. But this class has shattered into discrete fragments at the utterance of "ethnography," and its members float off into space, some beyond reach, the rest to alternative universes, from which they send me term papers better than they should be. The best is on teaching writing by teaching grammar.

PART III

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*Creative Scholarship and  
Publication  
in Composition Studies*



## *Coming of Age in the Field That Had No Name*

*I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.*

*I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.*

*I learn by going where I have to go.*

Theodore Roethke, from “The Waking”

### THE CALL OF STORIES

**F**rom the moment I heard the call of stories, seduced at the age of six by the siren song of Dr. Seuss, I wanted to tell stories of my own. I would become a Great Writer. So I turned, naturally, to their biographies. If I could figure out how great writers wrote I could learn to do it myself.

I longed to get locked into the local library—a gracious white-columned Georgian edifice shared by the town of Durham and the University of New Hampshire—where my ambition was to read all the books. If I could be surrounded by the works of Great Writers twenty-four hours a day maybe their strategies, as well as their substance, would seep in. To this end, I plotted. I would smuggle in my battered blue school lunchbox (eating in the library was strictly forbidden), secreting among the peanut butter sandwiches saved from lunch a flashlight instead of a thermos; I could survive on water from the drinking fountain. I planned to hide in Biology at closing time, a remote section of the stacks whose illustrated volumes I had often consulted in identifying specimens for the Girl Scout “Wild Flower Finder” and “Bird Finder” badges. But that was where the man in the long raincoat lurked, I had seen him, so after everyone left I intended to move straight to the Fiction and Biography section and stay there all night. Surrounded by books, I could “take my waking slow.”

But what if a lingering librarian came after me? I knew the tread of her sensible shoes, and could elude her. What if I were pursued, even caught, by the man in the raincoat? or the night watchman, with a flashlight of his own? or even the police? I would have to improvise.

Day after day I would run the three snowy blocks from school to the library’s welcoming warmth. Day after day I would await my chance. But invariably as the librarians turned out the lights at closing time I would

pull on my woollen snowsuit, wrestle to the door a stack of books I could barely see over, and wait in the icy darkness for my father, a chemical engineering professor, to take me home. I would have to learn the secrets of the Great Writers some other way.

#### LEARNING TO WALK THE WALK

I went to the University of Michigan still intent on becoming a Great Writer, expanded now by a desire to become a college professor—a Great Writing Teacher—as well. It's easy to say now, forty years later, "Oh, I've always been in composition studies, as well as in literature." But in the 1950s and 60s the field now so vast and so protean was, simply, inconceivable. There was no field—let alone discipline—that one could name, and there were no specifically labeled composition studies courses, no research models or literature, no mentors either at Michigan or anywhere else. There were, however, ways to learn how to read literature and to write and to study writing. I would "learn by going where I had to go," for at Michigan there was the latitude, through invention and improvisation, to put what I would study together in ways neither I nor anyone else had previously imagined.

The available intellectual context at Michigan at mid-century for what would coalesce as composition studies thirty years later consisted of such courses as Old and Middle English, historical and structural (pre-Chomsky) linguistics, philosophy of aesthetics, and creative writing. For a doctoral candidate in English to enroll in these courses in addition to the requisite doctoral seminars that in fact did march from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf (thereby replicating the undergraduate curriculum) was tolerated as bizarre eclecticism; my advisor even let me sign up for an advanced biology course in genetics. Why I expected to understand writers' biology from a course that began with fruit flies and sweet peas I cannot now remember, but my math gave out as the huge humming jar of F16 generation fruit flies, red-eyed and white-eyed, was passed up and down the aisles. I switched to an American lit course just in time to walk in on "I heard a fly buzz when I died"—music to my ears.

The usual route to Michigan's doctorate in English, modeled after Harvard's, bypassed the act of belletristic writing altogether, and followed the traditional path through the literary canon. Of the several thousand works on the understated eleven page reading list—one line reads "William Shakespeare, *Complete Works* (Including poems)"—the only ones that occasionally appear in contemporary composition studies are I.A. Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* and Kenneth Burke's *The*

*Philosophy of Literary Form*. Yet Michigan faculty cared a great deal about what their students were reading and how they wrote; such teachers as Sheridan Baker, Donald Hall, and Arthur Eastman (with seven other Michigan colleagues) were leaders in the writing and editing of such highly influential textbooks of the 1950s–80s as *The Practical Stylist*, *A Writer's Reader*, and *The Norton Reader*. At Michigan throughout my graduate as well as undergraduate years, I took a writing course every semester—exposition, fiction, play writing, but no poetry. I would stick to prose.

Primarily from these writing courses I came to understand firsthand what I continue to learn and relearn with everything I write and what I now teach to every student in every course. Most important, I learned that it is necessary to improvise, to learn by trial, error, educated guesses, and wild surmise not only what a writer has to say, but how one is going to say it. I learned that an experience (or a reading) can be rendered in innumerable versions, voices, modes; that writing in any mode can send numerous messages with social, political, cultural, ethical (and many other) implications; that dishonesty can destroy a piece, ethically and aesthetically. I learned that style is intimate kin to substance and to self; that the unsaid—de-emphasis, omissions, gaps, erasures—is potentially as significant as what is said, what is emphasized. I learned the importance of the critical rigor that undergirds writing well for an external audience—that every word, every syntactic structure, every punctuation mark, every space counts. I learned the pleasures of stylistic precision. I learned to read as a writer, to write as a reader, with an intimate understanding of the writer's craft, the writer's art (see chapter four). In short, I learned by writing what I now expect my students to learn, also by writing.

#### COUNTERPLOTING THE MASTERPLOT

I did not, however, learn from these courses what stories to tell. If anything, a decade of subjecting the Great Writers' great books to New Critical analysis was as intimidating as the jar of fruit flies had been. For the subtext of critical analysis that I came to understand in literature course after literature course was that, as a young American woman with a Midwestern orientation, my own stories didn't count. And neither did my style, always precariously close to the personal.

What stories, after all, did I have to tell? I who hadn't dared to spend a stolen night in the library did not dare to spend stolen nights anywhere else either. I had not roamed the high seas, fought at the front, or hit the road, the stuff of men's stories from here to eternity. I had not contemplated patricide or suicide, the 50s woman writer's road to immortality. I was sleep

deprived from *gemütlichkeit*, not *weltschmerz*, pushing the 10:30 social curfew every night, then writing course papers until dawn. Lacking shades, leather, or a Harley, I couldn't even fake a literary persona. Ann Arbor had, at the time, no coffee houses, no cafes, only Drake's Sandwich Shoppe and the Old German restaurant; a single beer led invariably to sleep, not profundity. If there was a salon, I wasn't invited. I regret sounding so conventional, but take heart from Eudora Welty's observation that "All serious daring starts from within."

My roommate used to say that I hadn't suffered enough to be a Great Writer. That in my mind I lived life on the margin as the principal actress in a series of improvisatory roles in the guerrilla theater of life didn't seem to count. That I was heading for a Ph.D. ("taking a man's seat," my advisor sneered) in an era when P.H.T. (Putting Hubby Through) was the norm hardly seemed the stuff of fiction. That I wanted to do research in an area that didn't exist seemed to me perfectly natural; as long I could figure out how to do the work, labels didn't matter. Nor did my parents' label for the man I would marry, "That Jew."

My parents had never approved of anyone I dated in either high school or college. They mocked the youth who invited me to the junior prom, "He's Catholic and besides, he's too fat." They ridiculed the grammar of my high school boyfriend, a voc-ed guy who built me an Adirondack chair in carpentry class and dyed his suede shoes bright blue—to match the pair his mother got for me from the shoe factory where she worked. By the time I got to college I had learned it was futile to explain or to argue about any of my decisions, professional or personal. "What good is literary criticism?" jeered my father the scientist, and when I'd try to answer he'd shoot back, "Prove it!" So I remained silent as they condemned one undergrad du jour ("His grades aren't good enough"—that meant he had some Bs) and froze out the parents of another whose Hungarian neighborhood was squeezed among the railroad tracks of downtown Detroit, not far from my German father's own birthplace.

"Break it off," hissed my parents, their lukewarm Christianity boiling as Martin, a philosophy major turned social psychologist, met them before leaving for a master's year in Edinburgh. Treating him like water, my father spoke only to me, "Martin can't be much of a man—he's too nice to you. Besides," he added, "if you get married you won't finish your Ph.D." There was no point in explaining that Martin and I had already vowed to enhance each other's personal and professional lives in whatever ways we could; I simply accepted Michigan's offer of a TAship. "Take off your ring!" they ordered when I returned to New Hampshire for Christmas vacation. My



rebuttal blazed on my finger. “We won’t come to your wedding.” So I invested what money I had in a one-way ticket to England, where Martin and I planned to marry and ad lib a summer of European travel.

“People can’t stand Jews,” my parents reiterated in June when I returned to pack. “As Martin’s wife, you’ll be the victim of prejudice for the rest of your life.” I was stuffing everything I owned into a suitcase. (The Adirondack chair sits on my mother’s deck to this day.) “If you marry Martin,” they proceeded to prove their claim, “we will have nothing to do with you, or your husband, or any children you might have.” The lock snapped shut, and in shock I left.

How could I dare to tell that story, and the stories within that story, that I myself scarcely understood? How could I find the right language to write about what burned at the bone? In a culture that celebrated the family cohesiveness I myself held as an ideal, who would listen? So when Martin and I returned to Michigan I excised the vertical pronoun from my repertoire and concentrated on critical papers, academic exercises that I believed I had no right to publish either. Who was I in comparison with all those well-known literary critics?

It took another quarter century to finally believe in my heart what I knew in my mind from analyzing the stories of others, that to write autobiography is a way to make sense of things that don’t make sense. It took that long to acknowledge to myself that true to the American tradition, I too had the right to sing the song of myself—or at least, to try. And it took twenty-five years of encouragement, indeed urging, from Martin, who trusted my storytelling long before I trusted myself, for me to write those stories down.

MY DOCTORAL DISSERTATION, A COMPOSITION STUDY  
BEFORE THERE WERE COMPOSITION STUDIES

In a pioneering seminar on literary biography I had become intrigued by three interrelated questions, existential and epistemological, “What is the truth, the meaning of a life?” “What is the creative process of Great Writers?” “How do you know?” In the early 60s these questions were asked by philosophers, by novelists, and by individual biographers, not by critics. Except for book reviews and Leon Edel’s slender volume on why he was a Freudian literary biographer, there was hardly any criticism on either biography or autobiography. In that course the students had to work in primary sources, the biographies and autobiographies themselves, and in the biographers’ source materials—letters, diaries, documents, manuscripts. Everything we investigated was original, and the possibilities were endless.

Everything we discussed leapt or ignored the boundaries—between literature and history, philosophy and psychology, fact and fiction, belletristic writing and criticism. The literary landscape, grim and drab from critical strip mining, with deep pits around the Major Literary Figures, became instantly reconfigured as a glimmering Garden of Eden, with a myriad of possible new avenues of access to familiar literary figures.

In quest of how the Great Writers wrote, I decided to write my doctoral dissertation on literary biography, “How Literary Biographers Use Their Subjects’ Works: A Study of Biographical Method, 1865–1962.” This was a study of reading and writing texts about the writing of texts—the biographies of writers of four centuries: a poet (George Herbert), a prose satirist (Jonathan Swift), a novelist (Charles Dickens), and a playwright (George Bernard Shaw). I’d have included women writers, too, had there been enough good biographies for my study. However, I needed at least six for each subject, and the major biographers, women and men alike, wrote mostly on men.

Composition studies today provides the language (italicized in what follows) for me to explain what I was doing thirty-five years ago. I wanted to understand how the two dozen biographers in my study worked—i.e. *constructed their subjects and constructed their texts*. In order to do this, I had to read the bulk of their sources—all of the authors’ primary works and significant criticism of these, the authors’ published correspondence, and other biographies—of the primary authors as well as others by the biographers in my study. I had to read as much critical material on biography as I could locate, biographies of figures prominently associated with my subject (Hester Thrale, John Forster, Ellen Ternan, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, among others), and criticism of writers often compared with my subjects (Donne, Pope, Thackeray, Wilde, among others). Thus my dissertation on *textual construction* involved a host of interrelated topics common to composition studies.

In part, my dissertation was a study of *reading*—in this case, how literary critics and historians read their source materials, primary and secondary—the subjects’ works and correspondence, earlier (often rival) biographies, criticism, and a host of other documents. Thus my dissertation became, perforce, a study of *the nature of evidence*, and of the *methodology* and *rhetoric* employed in using that evidence. I was especially hoping to see how biographers accounted for and understood their subjects’ creative processes (read *writing processes*) in the diverse genres. But except for one who included a painting of Herbert being inspired by an angel in a garden (as good an explanation as I would ever get), every biographer

throughout the entire century of biographies I studied read every author's works in every genre as "personal equations," straightforward or thinly veiled autobiography. Characteristically, Carl Van Doren asserted, "Gulliver's travels were Swift's travels. . . . Among the Houyhnhnms [in Book IV] Gulliver was almost undisguisedly Swift" (307, 191).

When the biographers weren't reading their subjects' works as direct transference of personal experience into poetry, fiction, even nonfiction, they read the works as emotional analogues and psychological projections of the authors' lives. For instance, Dickens's biographers claimed that the more vivid and intense Dickens's novels were, the more closely they resembled his life. Characters whose initials were D.C. and C.D., such as David Copperfield and Charles Darnay, were scrutinized for particular resemblances to the author. Thus Edgar Johnson's *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, well-received in 1952 (and reissued to equal acclaim in 1977), found both David Copperfield and Pip in *Great Expectations* "deeply revealing" of "the wounds that were still unhealed after a quarter of a century" (678; see also 982–83). These biographers read as historians of persuasions literary, cultural, ecclesiastical, social, political; as critics, they read as Anglicans, Marxists, Freudian or Jungian analysts. The women biographers read as men (see *How Literary* 93). No matter what their stance, even the biographers writing when New Criticism was the academically sanctioned way to read primary texts always read creative works as virtually unmediated autobiography.

Thus, my dissertation was also a study of the *rhetorical conventions and parameters of a scarcely examined genre of nonfiction prose*. It was a study of *rhetorical arrangement*—including the selection, nature, and organization of evidence; and of emphases and omissions (aha—gaps!). It was a study of *personae*, of both the primary authors and the biographers, and thus a study of *style*—particularly syntax, vocabulary, and tone. It was a study of *reader response* to the authors' primary texts over four centuries.

Nevertheless—and here's the caveat—because this was also a *quantitative study* as well as a *qualitative study*, it was highly unusual for a literature dissertation at that time or at any time. In it I examined how often biographers used each subject's works in particular ways and presented the results in tables—to the astonishment of my committee. The tables, in fact, signalled an affinity with the *scientific method*, an *inductive process* common in those composition studies from the 1960s to the present that deal with numbers of things (students, papers, errors, words in T-units), including the 30,000 item data base of essays in textbooks I am currently assembling to study "the essay canon." I had unwittingly prepared to do

this during a brief—yes, sophomoric—period when I decided that I would be an even Greater Writer if I learned about people through a double major in psychology as well as English. I plunged in by taking statistics, where I learned how to do another kind of reading—formulas, charts, tables, graphs, scores, percentages; how to do and interpret statistical surveys; and the grammar of number crunching. Although this requirement was so alien to the literature I loved that I never took another psych course, I was able to use what I'd learned in my dissertation.

For, in response to my *basic research question*, “How do literary biographers use their subjects’ works,” I *identified the sixteen most common ways*, among them: “life contributes to works” (e.g. Dickens’s claim, “The Brothers Cheeryble LIVE.”), “works differ from life,” “works reveal information”—coded or uncoded—“about life” (such as a description of Dickens’s childhood home from “Dullborough Town” in *The Uncommercial Traveler* 146) and the most prevalent of all, “autobiographical interpretations of works.” Then I *collected the data* (how many times each biographer used one of the identified ways), *tabulated it* (“let me count the ways”), and *interpreted it*. Interpretation added a number of *whys* to the *how* question, in particular, Why do literary biographers through the centuries persist in reading poetry, satire, fiction, and drama as unadulterated autobiography? (I did not, however, anticipate that critics would soon be reading autobiography as fiction.) Why do even careful scholars and psychoanalysts ignore the creative process? From these interpretations of the evidence I *drew my inductive conclusion*.

Although this configuration of concerns may have been unique in literary dissertations of the time, its individual methodological features (except for the tables) have been the staples of twentieth century literary criticism, as they are now in composition studies. That *composition studies* now provides new labels should signal a closing of the gap between literature and composition rather than a demarcation of separate and unrelated concerns.

“TRUST YOURSELF. YOU KNOW MORE THAN YOU THINK YOU DO.”

However, in the early 1960s the fact that my dissertation was remote from the community of literary scholars and that I was fascinated by the writing processes of real writers cemented my status in exile. Compared to the expulsion from my family this ostracism seemed remote and unreal. The first Christmas after our marriage, I had written to my parents, “We’re driving”—part of Martin’s dowry was a baby blue Nash Rambler—“to New Hampshire for the holidays.” “You can come,” my mother’s letter said, “but not Martin.” We sent them, that year, a present we couldn’t afford, a sleek

satiny pewter pitcher from Amsterdam, and we stayed at Michigan and studied for exams.

We would have the ideal family of our own, we promised each other then and often, and we would become the best parents we could. This meant a parenthood of continual improvisation. We'd invent our own roles and learn them, babies in arms, rather than following either our parents' rule-bound scripts or the ethos of the time. For our own mothers, and for most of our peers, biology determined the destiny of a woman's lifelong servitude to spouse and children. A 1960s variation allowed the Good (middle-class) Mother to work outside the home until the sixth month of her first pregnancy, then to put professional work on hold until her youngest of—preferably four—children had graduated from high school.

But Martin and I never regarded work and family as antithetical, and I expected to devote ample time to both. I had written the bulk of my dissertation while I was pregnant, and finished it after we moved to Cleveland, with Bard (named for you know who) on my lap or in a playpen nearby. I was accustomed to working with a child in the room—I always commandeered the biggest room in the house, so we'd have plenty of space. And I kept right on after Laird (named for you know where) was born, for it was vitally important to me that our children would always feel secure and welcome at home. Although the salary I earned from part-time teaching at Western Reserve paid a sitter eighteen hours a week, I was glad that the intellectual passions of my life, reading and writing about reading and writing, could be largely pursued at home rather than in a lab or in an office. So I learned to work in the interstices of the car pool and nursery school schedules, housework and hospitality, and at night after everyone else was in bed.

When Martin wasn't at his research job, he was being a 90s daddy, thirty years ahead of his time. Thus even while we were encouraged by Dr. Spock's cardinal dictum, "Trust yourself," we were defying the division of the sexes that pervaded the 40s, 50s and 60s editions of *Baby and Child Care*. Our two sons, like Konrad Lorenz's ducklings, imprinted themselves on whichever parent they saw first in the morning.

I still couldn't tell my own stories, but I now felt free—indeed, obliged—to tell someone else's, for analyzing other peoples' literary biographies mandated that I write one. It would be, like my dissertation, a hybrid of literary and what we now call composition studies. In 1985 Robert Scholes articulated in *Textual Power* the philosophy implicit in all my teaching and research ever since I earned my Ph.D. The best way to understand a text, says Scholes, is to create a text in response to it: "Our job

is not to produce ‘readings’ for our students, but to give them the tools for producing their own.” We can and should introduce our students to “the codes upon which all textual production depends,” and then encourage them to write their own texts in response to the literature they read (25–6).

Indeed, even as in Scholesian innocence I was finishing my dissertation, I had decided that the best way to understand biographical method was to write a biography myself. What could I learn from the creation of a primary work that wasn’t apparent when I analyzed other people’s literary biographies? What kinds of connections would I make between the subject’s works and the life? Could one ever be understood in isolation from the other? Did biography as a genre necessarily misrepresent the creative process, or did the biographers I’d studied fail to understand how creative writers wrote because they themselves didn’t write creatively? I still wanted to find out how a Major Writer actually wrote books—what I might have called research on the *composing process* (a term Janet Emig had yet to invent), big time. It never occurred to me to begin with something small and manageable, say, an article; I would leap straightaway into what I can see now is the researcher’s black hole—a full-length biography, where one can never know too much about one’s subject. The biography I wanted to write would *amplify my dissertation research*, rather than replicate it, a *direct means to tease out and test out its methodological implications* (again italics identify composition studies language).

I decided to write the biography of a significant American writer, embedded in the context of the times. Because I wanted to be free to test out my own theories, and to avoid excessive dependence on secondary sources, the biography—a *single case study*—would have to be written mainly from *primary sources*, a mixture of *literary, social, cultural, and political history* and *creative nonfiction* (another term waiting to be invented). I would have to be the subject’s first biographer. That I never conceived of discovering and resurrecting a neglected, safely dead woman writer or her work, such as Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, or Kate Chopin, was another phenomenon of the time; these subjects would await later distinguished feminist research.

Characteristically, I chose to do research the hard—but to me the most exciting—way. I decided to write about a living subject, to whose life, milieu, and primary documents I would have unrestricted access, without other interpreters (say, biographers, historians, critics, or journalists) as intermediaries. Thus I would have to be a more unobtrusive *participant-observer* than, say, James Boswell. I would have to like this as yet undetermined subject; why expend all the effort this would take on an uncongenial

figure? To ensure my intellectual independence, that person would have to agree in advance to cooperate but not to interfere with my writing. That these sound biographical principles embedded equal mixtures of intellectual arrogance (read *chutzpah*) and naivete is apparent only in retrospect. How I, a novice researcher, with no publication, no reputation, no status, no institutional support, and no funding, could expect a prominent author to agree to these conditions was a Boswellian act of faith, hope, and innocence.

#### COMING OF AGE WITH *DOCTOR SPOCK*

Geography, maternity, economics, and the middle-class mores of the mid-60s were as influential (some might say restrictive) as passion in my choice of subject. My two children were infants; I couldn't go very far away from Cleveland for very long. So I would have to write about the most significant author living in Cleveland, at a time when that riot-torn city was labeled "the Mistake on the Lake." In fact, I decided to write about the most popular author in America at the time, Western Reserve colleague and Cleveland Heights neighbor, Benjamin Spock, M.D., whose *Baby and Child Care* had for twenty years been selling a steady million copies annually, ever since its publication in 1946, its sales surpassed only by the Bible. I knew at the outset that I would have to penetrate the myths, public and private, surrounding this person, even with the considerable affinity toward the subject that is requisite for investing oneself in research of any kind.

But I did not know a subtle way to approach the national hero he was at the time. So I simply called him up and got right to the point, "I've recently finished my Michigan doctoral dissertation on literary biography . . . and now I'd like to write a real biography—of you." At 64, on the verge of retirement from his pediatric professorship, Spock was as unaware of celebrity protocol as I was. Within an hour of our first meeting he granted me access—unrestricted and exclusive—to a lifetime accumulation of primary sources: professional papers, manuscripts, correspondence (including some ten thousand letters from readers of his book), "royalty statements, tax returns, newspaper clippings beginning with his undergraduate days at Yale, his Olympic gold medal (Yale crew, 1929)," and magnificent family photographs. Trusting me more than I trusted myself, he provided weekly interviews; letters of introduction to friends, even enemies; the opportunity to follow him around the hospital, attend classes, and sit in on his pediatric practicum. No strings. He even lent me a white coat so I'd blend into the hospital milieu, and I hired his former secretary (herself at home with her own baby), who knew his voice and how to spell

all the proper names, to transcribe so many hours of interview tapes that we wore out two recorders (“Growing” 278).

During the five years of writing and rewriting *Doctor Spock: Biography of a Conservative Radical* (1972) I became an ad lib researcher, continually improvising my research methods beyond the boundaries of even the unconventional literary scholarship I’d used in my dissertation. What had begun as a study of a significant writer’s *composing process* (which Spock re-enacted, pacing the floor and, amidst long silences, dictating the first draft to his wife, who typed it) and *publishing history*, was becoming, in part, an *ethnographic case study* that incorporated *cultural* as well as *literary criticism*. So, perforce, I learned to draw on the methods of *ethnography* and *cultural anthropology, history of medicine, intellectual and cultural history*. These coalesced in addressing such questions as “What were the origins of Spock’s pediatric advice? the innovations? the influences?” as they pertained to what was in part a study of the *making of knowledge* not in pediatrics, but in the *advice manuals of popular culture*.

To understand the book in context required as well the methods of *investigative journalism* and *participant observation*, particularly because Spock in retirement was devoting most of his efforts to opposing the Vietnam War. As the scope of the biography itself continually expanded, I had to locate the source and context of each bit of information and then figure out how to get it and how to corroborate it. My sources included not only highly politicized documents, but—in this *microcosmic ethnographic study* (a comfortable concept, alien term—see chapter ten)—a plethora of peace activists, politicians, lawyers, gossipy neighbors in Cleveland Heights (we lived about a mile from the Spocks) in addition to the likely subjects—family members, doctors, editors, publishers, parents of “Spock babies” (including Margaret Mead), and the very babies themselves, my own children among them. I went on peace marches, pushing my children in their stroller, trailed by FBI snoops. I spent two summer vacations in New England and upstate New York, corroborating the details of Spock’s life while Martin took the boys to beaches and playgrounds. Our disarming entourage gained access to people guarding their privacy along with the family secrets—Sally Spock’s swimming pool, Marjorie Spock’s organic farm (“You’ll never have a sick chicken if you feed it earthworms”); how could they deny hospitality to parents with small children in tow on a hot summer afternoon?

To determine Spock’s influence, I read all his rivals. To determine Spock’s effectiveness, I checked out everything he said against my own children’s growth, health, and behavior—a research procedure that had



escaped my graduate professors' notice. What serendipity (as we named our border collie). Spock's recommended mixture of consistent firmness and love was indeed producing children of good will and good cheer. Although I couldn't cure anything, Spock's precise descriptions enabled me to become an expert diagnostician, able to spot chicken pox at a thousand paces. I also became a connoisseur of tone, as a parent and as a writer. For Spock's reassuring voice emanated from his ability to imagine concurrently the perspectives of a frightened parent and a sick baby, and calm everybody down: "A convulsion is a frightening thing to see in a child, but in most cases it is not dangerous in itself" (as opposed to a competitor's "A convulsion is terrifying to parents, but a baby rarely, if ever, dies because of one." *Doctor Spock* 125).

Thus the biography became a far more complicated *rhetorical study* than I had initially imagined and far more than a rhetorical study. As Spock's politics and pediatrics became inseparable, what I had conceived of as a *textual analysis* of the rhetoric of Spock's advice to parents became intertwined with an *analysis of the rhetoric of the peace movement* and of its critics. As one of the "nattering nabobs of negativism," Spock and the "Spock-marked generation" drew the wrath not only of Vice President Agnew's speech writer, William Safire, but of the Department of Justice, which indicted "The Boston Five" for conspiracy to encourage draft resistance. I had to learn enough law, in principle and in language, to write accurately about the trial, in which it became clear that the FBI (which also tapped my phone during the entire research period—"Hello, spies") had no sense of metaphor; a casual remark of irritation—a hostess's "Oh, I could kill him, he's so late for dinner!"—would be interpreted as a threat of murder. Attending and writing about the trial, which raised complex issues of ethics, human rights, and the law, and complex and contradictory ways of interpreting these, affirmed my own sense of the biographer's *professional and personal ethics*—including the importance of scrupulous accuracy, fairness to one's subject, the need to ground what one says in facts (John McPhee calls this "the literature of fact") even in the course of imaginative re-creation of scenes and characters.

Writing the biography of *Doctor Spock* reaffirmed the major lesson I'd learned from writing my dissertation, the importance of inventing flexible research methods to suit the demands of a protean subject, unpredictable and ever-evolving. And from Doctor Spock himself, the Strunk and White of baby book authors, I learned to write with clarity and absolute precision, as if a life depended on it. His friendly, accessible style knocked the dissertationese clean out of my own writing as I learned to

translate technical language into nonspecialized terms, to break up long sentences and paragraphs to please the ear and the eye. From Spock's oral composing I learned to listen to the words, the music, the sounds of silence. I resolved never again to write in language that I wouldn't speak, a decision that over time enabled me to create my own, human literary voice and eventually to write creative nonfiction, so thoroughly dependent on voice and the character of that speaker.

I wanted to change the world with my first hopeful volume, just as Spock had done with his. I did not. I wanted *Doctor Spock*, published in 1972, the year the pediatrician ran for President as the People's Party candidate, to help end the Vietnam War. No luck. Having written about a popular figure, I had no illusions that *Doctor Spock* would be my entree into the world of literary scholarship; though canonical, *Baby and Child Care* belonged to the wrong canon. I hoped, of course, that the book would receive critical acclaim (it did); that it would make some money (not a chance); and that I would instantly become everyperson's biographer of choice (alas, no). Above all, I hoped that with *Doctor Spock* I would write myself back into my parents' proud hearts. But the only letter my father ever sent to me after my marriage was to acknowledge the gift of this book: "Congratulations on your marvelous hatchet-job." To his profound misreading, like Cordelia in *King Lear*, I could say nothing.

"I LEARN BY GOING WHERE I HAVE TO GO"

To light out for the territory ahead is, in the American tradition, to learn by going where one has to go. With no boundaries, the only constraints are those of the imagination; the journey itself becomes the goal. Each of us who arrived in composition studies before that destination was labeled has traveled a different path, mapped a territory whose specific contours have taken shape in the course of the quest. That my particular passport to this new world, fraught with perilous promise as the unknown always is, had as its *bona fides* a dissertation on biographical method and a biography of the author of a revolutionary American book, makes it a travel document like none other.

That many of us in composition studies have taken parallel pilgrimages along other lonesome roads makes it a pleasure to sit around the campfire at professional meetings and reminisce about the good bad old days. The risks of rejection, exile, and ostracism have been a fair tradeoff for the exhilaration of working in the field we were inadvertently helping to invent. Some who grant *composition studies* the status of "a field" argue that it is still too haphazard, too undisciplined to be a discipline. That this—

shall we say rowdy?—field is still in the process of acquiring shape, coherence, form—a culture, and consequently a name of its own—is a continual source of promise, and of pleasure to those of us still on the journey, still learning where we have to go. What fun.

NOTE

- \* Some of the analysis of my biographical methodology that follows is adapted from “Growing Up With Doctor Spock,” 278–82.

## *Anxious Writers in Context*

**A**N ANXIOUS WRITER OUT OF CONTEXT MAY BE NEITHER ANXIOUS NOR A writer. The fundamental premise of social psychologist Kurt Lewin's classic *Field Theory in Social Science* is that behavior is the function of the interaction between the individual and his or her environment rather than a function of one or the other acting alone (see application in M. Bloom). And in "Meaning in Context: Is There Any Other Kind?" Elliott G. Mishler makes a compelling case for researchers in the social and psychological sciences and in education to consider the context of the behavior they study as a necessary condition for understanding that behavior.<sup>1</sup>

Too often teachers or writing researchers focus on only a single context, such as the school-based timed writing task, rather than on the multiple frames of reference in which the writer is operating. The more thoroughly that teachers, researchers, or the writers themselves get to know these contexts, which are nevertheless susceptible to change, the greater the chance not only to understand the difficulties but to resolve them.

Such a contextual approach has recently gained some popularity in research on writing processes, particularly in research with children, and with college students who are basic writers. Among the most notable investigations of children's writing processes are the longitudinal studies by Donald Graves (1975), Lucy Calkins, and their colleagues at the University of New Hampshire (Graves, Calkins, & Sowers). These researchers spent months in elementary school classrooms gaining the confidence of their subjects and carefully noting the occasions for writing, the instructions the teachers gave, and the opportunities for spontaneous writing. They watched their subjects write and talked with them about their writing, sometimes while they were doing it, sometimes immediately afterward. Over time the omnipresent investigators became fixtures in the classroom, part of the context. Their careful observations, based on meticulous record-keeping, reflect

numerous emotional, temperamental, and social aspects of the children's writing context, in addition to its intellectual features. When we read accounts of such investigations, we feel that we have gained a remarkably clear understanding of how schoolchildren write in different modes in the context of their classrooms.

Shaughnessy's pioneering *Errors and Expectations* and Bartholomae's "The Study of Error" make a convincing case for examining the writings of basic writers in their emotional, linguistic, rhetorical, and intellectual contexts. Bartholomae explains the theory of error analysis and justifies its contextual application:

Error analysis begins with a theory of writing, a theory of language production and language development, that allows us to see errors as evidence of choice or strategy among a range of possible choices or strategies. . . . Errors, then, are stylistic features, information about this writer and this language; they are not necessarily . . . accidents of composing, or malfunctions in the language process. Consequently, we cannot identify errors without identifying them in context, and the context is not the text, but the activity of composing that presented the erroneous form as a possible solution to the problem of making a meaningful statement. (257)

Shaughnessy's taxonomy of error, Bartholomae points out, "identifies errors according to their source, not their type" (257). A single type of error, such as subject-verb agreement, could have a variety of causes and might be variously categorized as "evidence of an intermediate system," an accident, or an "error of language transfer," such as dialect interference. A teacher familiar with the student writer's social and cultural contexts—such as the nature of the community and the language or dialect spoken at home—would be better able to identify the causes and provide appropriate solutions than would a teacher who focused merely on the errors and the "rules" for correcting them. Error cannot be accurately understood without an understanding of the student's history and current environment.

Considering the writer's immediate and broader social contexts, then, has proven valuable in understanding both how writers' abilities are developed and why errors are committed. I have found that considering such contexts has deepened my understanding of the difficulties or successes that other populations have with writing.

To understand the difficulties of anxious writers we must examine them in context, for in the context may lie clues to the solutions, as well as to the problems. "Writing anxiety," as I use the term, is a label for one or a combination feelings, beliefs, or behaviors that interfere with a person's ability to

start, work on, or finish a given writing task that he or she is intellectually capable of doing. The anxious writers who are the subjects of this and much other research are able to function well in other contexts; for them, the “inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of skill or commitment” (Rose, *Writer’s Block*) is a particular and perhaps isolated problem. Nevertheless, its significance or intensity may be powerful enough to overwhelm the writer’s whole life, especially if finishing a dissertation or writing articles or books is crucial to the writer’s career. Since writing anxiety often appears as context-specific, it is clear that the particular context must intrinsically be part of the guiding conceptual framework we use to define, study, and resolve writing anxiety.

#### THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: INDIVIDUAL WRITERS AND THEIR CONTEXTS

Before focusing on two case studies of academic women in context, I’d like to briefly identify the conceptual framework of this study.

Writers aren’t simply the sum of their contexts. They bring individual differences in perception, ability, and disposition to their writing contexts—perceptions and abilities that were themselves developed through interactions with previous contexts. Some features of this complex interaction may be seen as internal to the writer (intellectual, temperamental, emotional), others as external (social, economic, academic), though to an extent these overlap. I will attempt to identify and illustrate some of these features.

##### Internal features

*Intellectual Factors.* These consist of the writer’s understanding of the subject, knowledge of appropriate methods and strategies to use in research and writing (such as how to find resources and organize notes from multiple sources), vocabulary, and writing skills. It may also, when relevant, include a knowledge of how to type, edit, or use a word processor. If the knowledge is incomplete or inappropriately applied (e.g., “Always grab your audience immediately”) the writer may become enmeshed in a rigid, convoluted, or otherwise ineffective composing process (Rose “Rigid Rules,” *Writer’s Block*).

*Artistic Factors.* A writer may be more or less creative, independent, insightful, willing to make or break rules and take other risks that, if successful, will result in good writing.

*Temperamental Factors.* The writer’s motivation to start a particular piece of writing, and drive to continue and finish it, are critical factors. Whether a person can easily set goals, priorities, and time schedules and stick to them may well determine whether she finishes the work or not. A

writer's self-confidence (or lack thereof) may also influence what the writer has to say and whether or not she says it.

*Biological Factors.* The writer's general level of energy and how much of that he expends on a given piece of writing are of central concern, as is his state of health. A writer's awareness of his daily biorhythmic pattern can enable him to schedule his writing when he's at his most energetic and creative and to avoid writing at those times of the day or night when he's not. The effect of the writer's gender will be discussed in the section on social context.

*Emotional Factors.* The research of John Daly and various associates on apprehensive writers has demonstrated the importance of writers' attitudes toward writing in general and toward their own writing in particular. They can hold mythical beliefs that make them fearful of writing: "Writing is easy for everyone else and hard for me." They may have been forced to write as punishment. Or they may harbor fears and resentments of past experiences with stifling writing assignments ("What I Did on My Summer Vacation"), with stultifying formats (formulaic five-paragraph themes), and with scarifying writing evaluations (papers bleeding with red marks).

#### External contexts

The writer's individual factors interact with various social and cultural contexts. The two contexts of particular concern here are the broad social context and the more circumscribed academic contest.

*Social Context.* Virginia Woolf and Tillie Olsen emphasize the difficulties that social contexts create to inhibit or curtail altogether their writing and that of their peers. Virginia Woolf gave *A Room of One's Own* a metaphorical title for the literal context she considered essential for writing. She contends that "it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare" (48) because of the absence of supportive contexts and the presence of deterring ones. Women in that age would have had no educational context, no parental or social encouragement for writing. Their social context dictated early marriage, childbearing, and extinction of their literary talents, if not their very lives. Tillie Olsen, in *Silences* (1978), points out comparable difficulties for modern women, citing the frustrations of her own desire to write by the crushing needs to earn money, keep house, and care for children. In *Alice James: A Biography* (1980), biographer Jean Strouse focuses on the delicate Alice James in the context of her parents and vigorous brothers. Strouse contends that Alice had enormous literary and intellectual talents and was as fully capable of

being as fine a writer and thinker as were her famous brothers, William and Henry. Yet while her domineering father encouraged his sons to enter intellectual professions, Alice, ever the dutiful daughter, was encouraged to languish at home as a progressively deteriorating psychosomatic invalid. Clearly, the presence or absence of familial and social supports for writing can be crucial.

*Academic Contexts.* Academic contexts are consistently important as an encouragement or deterrent to writers, as is demonstrated by the research on elementary, high school, and college students cited above (see also Daly), and by the case studies of graduate students that I shall discuss in this chapter. These contexts, like others, have norms and expectations of the modes, style, extent, and sometimes content of student and faculty writing, often with rewards and punishments attached (grades, degrees, promotion and tenure). The same is true of much writing expected in the context of one's job. The pressure of deadlines, too much work, or the distractions by coworkers and a noisy or uncongenial environment may severely inhibit the writing, while the absence of such pressures may enhance it (L. Bloom, "Why Graduate Students Can't Write").

#### TWO CASE STUDIES OF GRADUATE STUDENT WRITERS

The case studies of graduate students, Sarah and Ellen, discussed below, offer long-term explorations of the relevant factors in their larger social and academic contexts in order to convey the situational reality behind the writing problems of these women. The solutions I've proposed are also related to these contexts.

Both Sarah and Ellen had completed their doctoral course work in English and in philosophy, respectively, at excellent universities but had become bogged down in their dissertations. Two and four years ago respectively, each came to my three-session series of workshops on *Overcoming Writing Anxiety* (L. Bloom, "Fear of Writing") for help in finishing their work. Sarah succeeded, but in the four years since the workshops Ellen has yet to complete a single chapter. I have become friends with both women and converse with or see each separately every other month or so. Each knows that she is the basis for a case history and provides information on which I have taken detailed notes. I have watched each write—or try to write—sitting slightly behind her, out of her line of vision but where her face and the writing on the paper are visible. I've timed the various aspects of their writing processes—occasionally interrupting (alas, an artifact of the investigation; see Mishler 5) to ask



what they were thinking about, why they were pausing or doing something else—and have taken elaborate notes on this and on our conversations immediately following the writing sessions. Because these women were trying to write over a period of months or years, it did not seem feasible to try to videotape their writing.

Sarah, graduate student and assistant professor: *role conflicts and contextual continuity*

Sarah's first two years of her first teaching job were plagued by the conflicts between her role as a graduate student trying to finish a dissertation and her role as an assistant professor of English at a major state university. The demands of her teaching role were so pervasive and all-consuming that they overwhelmed the supports from that same academic context that might have enabled her to finish her dissertation during this time.

Sarah was well-prepared to fulfill both roles. With a bachelor's degree in Classical Studies, and a doctorate in English nearly completed, she had been well-trained in literary analysis. Yet, as is typical of many students, she lacked self-confidence and continually needed to receive external validation of her capability (Tavris & Offir 189) through high grades, instructors' praise, and encouragement to publish. (Indeed, the publication of one chapter of her dissertation helped her to get her first academic job.) This supportive context was ideal for writing.

Sarah's excellent initial appointment validated the extra year she expected to spend writing the last chapter of her dissertation and preparing the entire work for publication. However, her new context, although academic, turned out to be anything but supportive of her writing aims because her professorial role dominated her student role to the point of oblivion. Sarah knew she was expected to excel in teaching, scholarship, and service to the university. Because she was conscientious and perfectionistic about every aspect of her work, she spent a great deal of time in class preparation and fifteen to twenty minutes in grading every student paper.

Sarah also spent a great deal of time on committee work—which she felt obliged to perform—and a half day a week volunteering at the campus Women's Center. So the time she had initially set aside for writing, two days and two evenings a week, was continually eroded. Although she could keep up with the current scholarship on her dissertation topic by reading during the short blocks of time available, Sarah believed, erroneously, that for writing she needed a minimum of four hours of uninterrupted time, which was virtually nonexistent. Consequently, she postponed the actual

writing until vacations, stopped trying to write during the academic year, and measured her progress instead by the stacks of notecards that continued to accumulate.

But when summer came, she took advantage of the opportunity to gain administrative experience, another facet of her professorial role, by directing a program for women returning to school. "It's only for five weeks," she rationalized. "I'll still have the rest of the summer to finish my dissertation, and I need the money." But by the time she got back to her dissertation, her fine critical eye was slightly out of focus, and to get up sufficient momentum to write she had to reread and rethink the preceding chapters. This led to several weeks of endless tinkering with what she had believed she'd already completed the year before, and all too soon it was time to prepare for the fall semester's classes.

Sarah spent the first semester of her second professorial year in a manner similar to the first. Procrastination in the name of preparation, either for her own classes or for her last chapter, was no crime, she continually repeated. Moreover, there was far more pressure from her chairman, peers, and students to function fully in her teaching role at the expense of her graduate work. What little counterpressure there was came not by her own instigation but from new members of her dissertation committee who, by long distance, were insisting on a number of fundamental changes in the existing manuscript before she could even get to the unwritten chapter. They, like most such committees, focused entirely on the text, unaware of and indifferent to the context in which the work wasn't getting done.

However, in January the university exerted pressure on Sarah to finish her dissertation or be fired; this impelled her to seek help in my workshop on *Overcoming Writing Anxiety*. Together we worked out a plan of action that allowed her to give appropriate emphasis to both student and teacher roles in order to complete the necessary writing.

This meant that Sarah had to change some of the dimensions of her current situation. She had to establish priorities and set goals that could be accomplished within a realistic time schedule. This meant allocating enough time, week by week, month by month, to fulfill her most pressing obligations. So she divided her worktime (including evening and weekend hours) about equally between teaching and dissertation writing, pared down her university committee work, greatly reduced her paper grading time (without loss of meaningful commentary—it can be done), and eliminated activities not directed toward her primary goals of finishing her dissertation and keeping her job.

Sarah's new, realistically demanding schedule provided a far more structured context than she had been working in before. It enabled her to balance her primary roles judiciously and to write about twenty hours per week during the academic year, a great deal more than had her earlier, vaguer schedule of "finish my dissertation by the end of the summer." She had to accomplish definite goals by the end of each week or month—for instance, to revise a chapter, or to write ten pages of the new chapter.

Her emphasis on the ends, on actually finishing the writing, led her to stop spending excessive time pursuing the means, and she stopped investigating materials that exceeded the boundaries of her research. She realized that such protracted reading had become an insidious form of procrastination. Her excessive reading on peripheral topics had also begun to drastically alter the shape of her dissertation as she tried to accommodate all of her diverse notes. Trained from childhood to be deferential to authority, a characteristic more common in women than in men (Maccoby & Jacklin), she had begun to believe she could say nothing as original or as perspicacious as her sources, nor could she write as elegantly.

Sarah was further inhibited at this point by a writing problem that had not appeared until the stakes for finishing her dissertation became so high. She grew perfectionistic, rigidly adhering to an inappropriate rule ("Always perfect each paragraph before you proceed to the next") that made her feel obliged to rewrite small blocks of text incessantly without notable improvement.

Neither perfectionism nor labor in excess of the demands of the task appears to be related to gender (Tavris & Offir, chapter six), nor is writing anxiety so related (Daly). In fact, since from the age of ten or eleven through the high school years, girls outperform boys of the same age on both "lower" and "higher" measures of verbal skill (Macoby & Jacklin), we might expect girls to be less anxious as writers than boys. We might also expect that this greater confidence—fostered, perhaps, by more writing experience—might carry over into adulthood. But such is not the case. It may be that, because women in general have lower self-confidence than men (Tavris & Offir 189) and are socialized not to be risk-takers, the pressures of writing a dissertation affect them more strongly than men, though this remains to be explored in research.

However, women also appear to be more willing than men to try to reduce the pressures and more socialized toward getting help to do so. Nathanson has found that women are more oriented than men toward both preventing and relieving medical and psychological problems. This

may explain why over twice as many women as men seek help from writing specialists, a ratio comparable to that of clients consulting physicians, social workers, and other professionals for advice on other problems.

With my help, Sarah was able to regain some of her initial confidence in writing and to follow the manageable time schedule we established. Fortunately, her restructured academic context provided large blocks of time for writing and reinforced that writing with the normative expectation that it would not only be accomplished but rewarded. With two others struggling to finish their dissertations, she formed a support group (another type of context), an informal "Dissertations Anonymous." They met weekly to chart their progress, reinforce their writing goals, and encourage each other.

Sarah finished her dissertation on schedule, earned her Ph.D., and then followed the same schedule to write a related article. By ending her role as a graduate student, Sarah also ended her role conflict, and she learned to let the elements of her academic context that were conducive to writing function to support her writing as a continuing aspect of her academic career.

#### *Ellen: A Study In Contextual Interference*

Ellen, thirty-eight, has been a graduate student for nine years and is never likely to finish her dissertation, despite a great deal of good advice on how to do so. She cannot escape the many interferences from the contexts of her marriage, motherhood, and community, all of which interfere with her often postponed plans for extended research and writing.

Ellen, married at nineteen, spent four years as a part-time student while she reared her infant daughter. Divorced at twenty-four, she worked for three years as a copy editor. During this time she became a meticulous corrector and reviewer of others' writing but was sufficiently inhibited by this process to avoid writing on her own.

Ellen married again at twenty-eight and started graduate work as a part-time doctoral student in philosophy, while Stan, her husband, began an assistant professorship in history. It was hard to write papers in her existing physical context—an apartment with no space to leave her materials out between writing sessions, no "room of one's own." As a hypercritical former editor, Ellen was left with a mental set that made it difficult to write and to evaluate her own work. Her marital context exacerbated these difficulties because both Ellen and Stan felt that, since Stan was the family breadwinner, his requirements for research and writing took priority over Ellen's.

Their family pattern called for Ellen to do nearly all the housework and to care for their two young children herself, generally unrelieved by Stan or

a sitter. When the children were awake, they dominated the apartment and eliminated both the temporal and physical contexts conducive to writing. Ellen, temperamentally most alert in the morning, had no choice but to do most of her reading and writing at night after the children were in bed, when she was tired. Her family situation and her academic situation continually impinged on each other. Ellen's course work was prolonged over six years to accommodate her domestic situation. Nevertheless, the academic context provided some necessary supports: fixed deadlines for papers, easily accessible library facilities, professors and peers with whom she could discuss her work. She had just passed the qualifying exams when Stan took another job, still untenured because he himself had not finished the book he'd been working on during the entire time.

The move uprooted Ellen from her academic context and eliminated its supports. Her dissertation chairman let Ellen take the initiative in communicating with him. At a distance she was not only out of sight, but out of mind. She knew no one nearby with whom she could discuss her dissertation research. She had to get most of her research materials through interlibrary loan for short periods only, a time-consuming and frustrating process.

She was particularly hampered by the intellectual factor. She didn't know how to do research for a long work or how to write one. Nor did she know how to schedule her research and writing time to finish in an appropriate period. Her advisor never told her how to do it. A prolific writer himself, he simply assumed that all his graduate students knew how, and they didn't want to appear ignorant by asking him. Stan, mired hopelessly in his own work-in-progress, provided a poor model and no constructive advice. So, typical of many novice researchers, Ellen decided to read everything in the general field before focusing more precisely on her topic.

A year later, still reading in an increasingly desultory fashion, she came to my workshop for *Overcoming Writing Anxiety*. Several other factors became clear from our discussion. Her family situation was a consistent deterrent to her writing, for she continued to assume most of the responsibility for rearing the children and running the household; their needs always took precedence over her own. Her community involvement took second priority, as she performed many services for her neighbors and community organizations. Her emotions and temperament contributed to the setting of these priorities; she enjoyed these purposeful activities and found it far easier to complete those with their specific time limits than to work on her unstructured dissertation reading, which she kept postponing to an unspecified later time. When she did work on her preliminary

research, it became less and less focused because every topic suggested a myriad of others.

My advice to Ellen centered on re-establishing her academic context and on structuring her intellectual and domestic contexts so she could work effectively. She should resume communication with her advisor (whom she'd been avoiding for over a year) to arrive at a clear understanding of the scope, emphasis, methodology, innovativeness, and length of her dissertation. With her advisor's assistance, Ellen should determine the appropriate resource materials for her first chapter, which she would write in a less-than-perfect draft and send to her advisor for comments before revising. She should feel free to ask him anything at any point, rather than struggling in isolation with problems she couldn't solve.

Moreover, Ellen and her advisor should also determine a realistic time schedule for writing the first draft of each chapter, for circulating it among her committee members, and for revising her writing. Ellen's schedule should accommodate the other essential demands on her time, and she should postpone less crucial community and domestic activities until after she had finished her dissertation. She should also try to write regularly when she was most alert—in her case, in the morning.

Yet despite Ellen's good intentions, this plan (ambitious but realistic) did not work. There were many reasons, some personal, some contextual. Ellen's temperament undermined her schedule. Without sufficient self-motivation, there was no feasible way for her to remain accountable to either her schedule or her advisor. Although Ellen believed, "I need to finish my dissertation to get out from under my dependency on my advisor," she actually enjoyed the erratic but increasingly slower pace of her desultory reading and was reluctant to change it. She also enjoyed the activities of her family and community too much to put them aside, even temporarily; and so when she did try to write it was, she said, "only in small stretches," an inefficient pattern because of the large percentage of warmup time her particular writing process required.

Ellen's temporal and social contexts combined to contribute to her inertia. Why work so hard, as Stan continued to do, for the dubious rewards of an academic career, when jobs, scarce in any case, were even more difficult to obtain for a beginner with limited geographic mobility? Why work so hard when, at her age, her career span would be relatively short?

Trying to write in the context of her marriage was a particular deterrent because Stan's difficulties with his own writing had such a negative impact on Ellen's work as well. Each spouse interpreted the other's queries about work ("How's your writing going?") "as a form of nagging, no matter how

well meant," said Ellen. "We haven't been able to discuss our work with each other in several years. When Stan's writing is not going well, he thinks of ways to interrupt me, and I can't write either. Or else I feel guilty if my work is going along better than his, and I stop."<sup>2</sup>

To resolve Ellen's writing problems would require a marriage therapist in addition to a writing specialist, to focus intensively on their family context as the source of some of the difficulties. Perhaps such therapy would stimulate in both partners a greater desire than either member of the couple currently possesses to complete their extended writing projects (see M. Bloom). Alas, in this case *carpe diem* has seemed preferable to *carpe dissertation*.

As Ellen's case illustrates, when contexts not conducive to writing interfere with those that are, the conflict may produce little writing—and little desire to do any. Even when writing teachers and researchers understand the scope of the problems, they may not be able to resolve the difficulties of approximately one quarter of the anxious writers who seek help. As Milton's Satan laments of his own context in *Paradise Lost*, "Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell." More psychologically oriented writing therapists (often people with Ph.D.s in English and several months of counseling training) often claim that after several months of therapy their clients feel a great deal more comfortable about writing, but to my knowledge there is no available data on whether or not the clients are actually completing the writing projects that drove them to the counselor in the first place. Yet, as Sarah's case reveals, by considering intellectual, emotional, temperamental, and other factors, teachers and researchers can often help anxious writers, providing specific solutions adapted to the social and academic contexts in which the difficulties occur.

Case studies, as has been implied throughout the exploration of the histories of Sarah and Ellen, reveal the importance of studying writing processes in the relevant contexts of the writer's life. Not only are the immediate writing contexts (such as the university and the home) of paramount influence on the performance of the writer; so are the writer's multiple roles in these contexts, among others, the roles of student, professor, spouse, parent, wage earner. Equally important is the writer's socialization into these roles, which determines how he or she is likely to perform in a given situation. For instance, the intensity with which the writer pursues the goals of working on and completing a particular writing task is inevitably influenced by his or her involvement in other roles and commitment to other activities perhaps unrelated to writing. When the aims and responsibilities of one role (say, wife, mother, or faculty member) conflict

with another (say, student), the nature of the disequilibrium in its full context has to be understood before the person can be helped.

The dancer, the dance, and the place of performance are inextricably interrelated; they cannot be understood in isolation. Teachers, dissertation advisors, researchers, counselors, friends, or others working with anxious writers need to understand the writing problems as fully as possible in the appropriate contexts in order to provide specific, workable solutions adapted to the writer's temperament and to the performance of multiple roles in multiple contexts. An anxious writer, fully understood in context, can be more readily helped to be less anxious, more productive—to be simply, a writer.

#### NOTES

1. Mishler's view is reinforced by Janet Emig's theoretical "Inquiry Paradigms and Writing" (1982) and by Carol Berkenkotter's illuminating application of the "methodology of protocol analysis" combined with "the techniques of naturalistic inquiry" in her study of "The Planning Strategies of a Publishing Writer" (1983).
2. It should be noted here that coworkers in business settings may also impede each other's efforts in similar ways. Bosses can make their employees who have to write reports or memos highly anxious by failing to provide clear instructions for what they should do, yet making them do the work over—and over, and over again—when it isn't right. Likewise, a perfectionist colleague who is never satisfied with the penultimate draft may slow down a rapid and capable writer.



## “I Write for Myself and Strangers”: Private Diaries as Public Documents

CONTRARY TO POPULAR PERCEPTION, NOT ALL DIARIES ARE WRITTEN—ultimately or exclusively—for private consumption. Very often, in either the process of composition over time, or in the revision and editing that some of the most engaging diaries undergo, these superficially private writings become unmistakably public documents, intended for an external readership. The author of such a work writes, as Gertrude Stein says of her own writing, “for myself and strangers” (*Making* 289). Indeed, it is the audience hovering at the edge of the page that for the sophisticated diarist facilitates the work’s ultimate focus, providing the impetus either for the initial writing or for transforming what might have been casual, fragmented jottings into a more carefully crafted, contextually coherent work. Diaries, notebooks, and journals which may originate as “emotionally naked” writings “predicated on privacy,” metamorphose, says William H. Gass, into public documents when the writer already has an “eye on history”: “If I know when I’m gone, my jottings will be looked over, wondered at, commented on, I may begin to plant redemptive items, rearrange pages, slant stories, plot small revenges, revise, lie, and look good. Then, like Shakespearean soliloquies, they are spoken to the world” (“Art of Self” 49).

This process of adaptation to an audience is characteristic, to a greater or lesser extent, of all diarists who conceive of an audience external to themselves. Anaïs Nin, who in many ways *is* her 150-volume diary, explains the diarist’s quintessential relationship to her work and her audience. In rereading “my old Journals,” she says, “nothing seems to be peculiarly mine, but pain, sorrow, triumph, struggle, vision, all flowing from some common, eternal source. I write for other people, *even* when I say, ‘I

am alone, I am special, I am different. . . . I play a thousand roles” (*Early Diary* 4: 156, 178).

As biographer Noël Riley Fitch makes abundantly clear throughout *Anais: The Erotic Life of Anais Nin*, every page of Nin’s diary, published and unpublished, corroborates Gass’s understanding of how diarists revise their works (and thus their lives) to address an audience: “Her imagination (in life and diary) transforms events, parties, conversations into the best light” (67). As Nin’s life, constructed and reconstructed, proceeds, she issues contradictory statements to counteract others’ complaints about her diaries’ numerous “mistakes”: “she tells one questioner that everything is in the *Diary*, another that ‘much’ will have to wait for later publication” (Fitch 396). Nevertheless, Nin eliminates from the diaries altogether the most egregious deception of all, the fact that “during the last twenty-five years of her life she divided her time between two husbands” (6), one on each coast, whose economic support sustained her fiction of “an independent, bohemian woman artist” (395). Not only Nin’s work, but numerous examples by less flamboyant writers demonstrate that it is a mistake to think of diaries as a genre composed primarily of “private writings,” even if they are—as in many women’s diaries—a personal record of private thoughts and activities, rather than public events.

Here I take issue with one premise of Harriet Blodgett’s excellent study of *Centuries of Female Days: English Women’s Private Diaries*. Although I share her definition of “private” as signifying not “domestic, but rather *personal*,” I question the circumscription of her study. Blodgett excludes from her study, as potentially less than candid, diaries written or revised for publication and those “intended for immediate reading by a second party” (13). Nevertheless, because parents or “husbands may expect diary privileges,” the texts she does include were not as private as Blodgett claims. Indeed, she says that some husbands, such as Percy Shelley, “continued their wives’ diaries during the women’s time in childbed” (57–8).<sup>1</sup> When such readers lurk at the writer’s elbow, welcome or not, there is no way to rule out self-censorship. Moreover, Blodgett herself stresses the importance of the diarists’ intent to “produce a record for others. They write for the eventual edification of others or for their own children; they write for posterity, near or remote” (69). I will argue here that the presence of an audience, whether near or remote, requires accommodation through the same textual features that in all cases transform private diaries into public documents.

I also assert that for a professional writer there are no private writings. Gass makes explicit that the writer’s mind is invariably alert to the concerns

of an audience and shapes the text, even letters and diaries, to accommodate these. The private performance may be less polished than the manuscript destined for publication from the outset, but once a writer, like an actor, is audience-oriented, such considerations as telling a good story, getting the sounds and the rhythm right, supplying sufficient detail for another's understanding, can never be excluded. All writers know this; they attend to such matters through design and habit. A professional writer is never off duty. Nancy Walker makes clear Virginia Woolf's "public presence" in her analysis of Virginia Woolf's diary and letters: "Even in letters to those closest to her [on the same topic], Woolf alters her expression to accord with the presentation of self required by the relationship" (293).<sup>2</sup>

Thus in this chapter I will identify and analyze the textual features of several excellent diaries by women, some professional writers (Virginia Woolf and Anaïs Nin), others for whom their diary or derivative work is their only publication (Natalie Crouter and Margaret Sams), and that sometimes posthumous (Anne Frank, Mary Chesnut), to demonstrate that many private diaries are actually public documents. In order to do this it is first necessary to identify the features of truly private diaries, such as those of Martha Ballard (segments published in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *The Midwife's Tale*) and the unpublished manuscript of a Michigan farm wife. My analysis, however, is generally applicable.

#### FEATURES OF TRULY PRIVATE DIARIES

*Purpose, scope, and style.* Truly private diaries are those bare-bones works written primarily to keep records of receipts and expenditures, the weather, "visits to and from neighbors, or public occurrences of both the institutional and the sensational sort" (Ulrich 8). Written with neither art nor artifice, they are so terse they seem coded; no reader outside the author's immediate society or household could understand them without extra-textual information. For example, the 9,965 diary entries that midwife Martha Ballard made between 1785 and 1812, ten months of which form the primary text of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's brilliant exegesis in *A Midwife's Tale*, follow this culturally dictated format. Ballard's daily entries are short, seldom more than a hundred words; her observations are elliptical and usually uninterpreted; she doesn't identify people or places or analyze events. She doesn't need to; she is writing this aide-mémoire exclusively for herself. The entry for October 5, 1789 is typical:

*I have been at home. Receivd fi Bushel of rie of Captain Hersey as reward for assist-  
ing his Lady.*

A rainy day. I combd 7 lb of flax for myself & 4 for Cyrus. Mr. Ballard went to Captain Coxes. Hannah is at Mr Hamlins. Polly Savage here. Drank Tea. Mr Savage returnd Johathans hors which he rode to Green. I am informed there was a man Drownd in Joes Eddy who Came passage from Boston with Captain Howard. (103)

*Form.* That this format has not changed significantly over the centuries is evidenced by a typical entry from the 1949 diary of an anonymous Michigan farm wife:

Friday February 4, 1949—3 eggs.

Little snow fell. I sent letters to Norali and Mrs. Smith. Got one from Betty. I did my ironing, While Roy and Jack went to the sale. Roy bought another calf there at 8:30 C and C came. Brought the grocery's \$2.66. They stayed until midnite. had a nice evening, had a lunch. Now Jack went to bed. I'm going soon.

This twentieth-century diarist is using a page-a-day preprinted memorandum book to record exactly what Ulrich found typical of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century diaries: income (3 eggs), expenditures (\$2.66 for groceries), the weather, correspondence, visits, everything largely uninterpreted except for such comments as “had a nice evening.” She gives no evidence of feeling constrained by this format; like Ballard, she rarely writes more than a hundred words, never exceeding the daily allotment of space.

*Structure.* Such diaries march along chronologically, their day-by-day progress dictated by the format and textually insulated from the rest of the work. They exhibit no foreshadowing and scarcely a retrospective glance except to keep score, tallying accounts or, in Martha Ballard's case, babies delivered as of January 15, 1796: “*This is the 612th Birth I have attended Since the year 1777. . . .* [Mr Mathews] wife was delivered at 6 hour morning of a fine daughter after a severe illness. Her first Child.” She continues, still keeping accounts: “I received 9/. Made a present of 1/6 to the infant. I returnd home and find my house up in arms”<sup>3</sup> (Ulrich 206). The reader must supply whatever integration of theme, subject, character there is, for the private diarist does not do this.

*Contextualization.* As Ulrich points out, “[Ballard's] diary does not stand alone” (34, my italics). It lacks sufficient development and detail to make it self-coherent. Someone else has to identify the people, places, and allusions, explain the meaning of actions and events in the diaries of Ballard and the Michigan farm wife, for the authors do not. Thus, as with any private, heavily coded, self-referential work, Ulrich has to use maps, wills, tax lists, deeds, court records, town-meeting minutes, medical treatises, novels, religious tracts, others' diaries and private papers (34) in order to make

sense of the midwife's diary. That it is necessary to supply such an elaborate context is the critical difference between truly private texts and those private diaries that are public documents.

*Characters, central and subordinate.* In such truly private diaries the diarist does not shape the evidence to reinforce a preconceived and therefore self-controlled authorial persona. Indeed, she gives little or no evidence of concern with authorial image at all; it emerges unwittingly from the materials. For instance, Ballard's entry of January 14, 1796 says merely "Snowd. I was Calld at 7 hour Evening to see Mrs Mathews who is in Labour. I tarried all night. Slept none." Assiduous readers have to infer from other diary entries and a great deal of information from supplementary sources that Ballard, sixty-one years old, rode horseback at night through a snowstorm to a cold, drafty, flea-infested backwoods cabin in central Maine where she performed this service. Evidence from these entries reveals that she is courageous, strong, hardworking, generous, beset by a messy house, and proud of her obstetrical performance. From such fragments readers must make their own mosaic portrait of Martha Ballard, or of the Michigan farm wife, and interpret it for themselves.

The subordinate characters who populate these diaries are more faintly limned; readers must search the entries in quest of such fugitive entities as Hannah, Mr. Hamlin, Polly Savage, Johathan, Norali, Mrs. Smith, Betty, Roy. Likewise, the characters of even the diarists' husbands, Mr. Ballard and Jack, must be inferred primarily from fragmentary actions, for they are never analyzed or described in depth. As a consequence, the characters, major and minor, are more likely to be identifiable by their roles (midwife, farm wife) and relationships (Martha's daughter, farmwife's husband) than as individuals; drama among them resides largely in the imaginative construction of the beholder.

*Contemporary Value.* Diaries such as these, unearthed from attics and storerooms of old houses, are today staple holdings of historical societies and state libraries. They are the source of a great deal of valuable information: historical, economic, political, social, medical, cultural. Although they may provide the chronology of the writer's life, they lack the depth and dimension of biography or autobiography. As Ulrich observes of the midwife's diary:

[It] reaches to the marrow of eighteenth-century life. The trivia that so annoyed earlier [male] readers provide a consistent, daily record of the operation of a female-managed economy. The scandals excised by local historians provide insight into sexual behavior, marital and extramarital, in a time of tumult and change. . . . The somber record of her last years provides rare evidence on the nature of aging in the pre-industrial world . . . (33)

## FEATURES OF PRIVATE DIARIES AS PUBLIC DOCUMENTS

In contrast, an examination of some of the characteristic features of public private diaries will show why they are indeed essentially freestanding public documents, artfully shaped to accommodate an audience.

*Scope.* Diaries that are public documents have a potentially much wider scope than private works. No diarist can include everything; all diary writing, like all other writing, private or public, is perforce selective. In “To Fashion a Text,” Annie Dillard explains how that process of selectivity works in writing about one’s life: “Don’t hope in a memoir to preserve your memories. . . . [I]t is a certain way to lose them. You can’t put together a memoir without cannibalizing your own life for parts. The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them.” She continues, “After you’ve written, you can no longer remember anything but the writing. . . . After I’ve written about any experience, my memories—those elusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling—are gone; they’ve been replaced by the work” (70–71).

Whereas the basis of selectivity for the truly private diary is predetermined by topic—the weather, accounts received, visitors, daily occurrences—the public diarist’s range of subjects is potentially infinite, generated by the writer’s response to her world, varied and variegated, including not only people and events but her reading and intellectual and philosophical speculations. Anaïs Nin characterizes her diary as “the moment when I relive my life in terms of a dream, a myth, an endless story” (*Dairy I*: 89)—and of enormous variety, as we know from its many volumes. The public diary’s tremendous scope remains even when the writer is physically confined, as Natalie Crouter’s *Forbidden Diary: A Record of Wartime Internment 1941–45* reveals. For economy’s sake, in a note I will provide a lengthy list of the topics Crouter’s diary covers December 20–25, 1943, a characteristically wide range even during the Christmas season.<sup>4</sup> *Form.* Because diaries as public documents are broader in scope and more fully developed than their truly private counterparts, they admit of far greater variation in form and technique, even within their day-by-day format. Virginia Woolf’s description of her ideal diary, regarded by many contemporary critics as the quintessential definition of women’s diaries, addresses its form, essence, and manner of composition: “What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit, & yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace any thing, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds & ends without looking them through.”

However, leaving a random assemblage of material at rest does not satisfy the professional writer's artistic sense, for, continues Woolf, "I should like to come back, after a year or two, & find that the collection had sorted itself & refined itself & coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life, & yet steady, tranquil composed with the aloofness of a work of art." Although rereading an old diary will reveal significance unrecognized at the time of composition, the writer should not be seduced by the form's apparent casualness, for "looseness quickly becomes slovenly." She reminds herself—and all other eventual readers—that even in diaries "a little effort is needed to face a character or an incident which needs to be recorded. Nor can one let the pen write without guidance; for fear of becoming slack & untidy" (*Diary*, April 20, 1919, I: 266).

*Structure and literary techniques.* In the hands of a skilled writer, the public diary's natural time line reinforces its overall narrative structure, even though the story may be told *ad seriatim* over a period of days, weeks, years, with some elements resolved only in the course of an entire lifetime. The diarist, of course, cannot write about future events without rewriting the manuscript *ex post facto*, but she can break out of the lockstep in which the chronological format confines less skilled writers. Techniques to circumvent the diary's dailiness include the employment of foreshadowing and flashbacks; emphasis on topics rather than chronology; repetition of philosophical themes and pervasive issues; character depiction; scene setting; and the use of integrative metaphors, symbols, and other stylistic devices. All of these techniques help to develop and contextualize the subject, and thus aid in orienting the work to an external audience.

The mammoth critical edition of *The Diary of Anne Frank* makes such changes readily apparent: it displays in parallel Anne's first draft; and her second-draft revisions, emendations, and expanded material, written in 1944 before the Franks' hiding place was discovered, to prepare the manuscript for postwar publication (61). Thus part of her original entry for 30 September 1942 reads:

This morning we were glad that the plumber didn't come, because his son who was in Germany and had returned, was having to go back again because he had received another call-up. Mr. Levinsohn came instead, he had to boil up test samples for Mr. Kugler. It wasn't very pleasant, because this person, just like the plumber, knows the whole house, so we had to be as quiet as mice.

Whereas in this version only the last half of the last sentence would make much sense to an outside reader, the revision, written from Anne's more

sophisticated perspective of fifteen (and a veteran of two years of diary-keeping), accommodates an external audience much more satisfactorily:

The days are becoming very quiet here. Levinsohn, a small Jewish chemist and dispenser, works for Mr. Kugler in the kitchen. He knows the whole house very well and therefore we are always afraid that he'll take it into his head to have a peep in the old laboratory. We are as quiet as baby mice. Who, 3 months ago, would have guessed that quicksilver Anne would have to sit still for hours—and what's more, could? (261)

Here the revising diarist eliminates the confusing and irrelevant first sentence, identifies Mr. Levinsohn, and explains the Franks' motivation for keeping quiet. A particular mark of a mature writer, Anne has distanced herself as author from herself as a character ("quicksilver Anne"), and contrasts the change in her characters' behavior caused by three months in hiding.<sup>5</sup> The rhetorical question is directed to unknown future readers, not to herself.

*Contextualization.* Diaries that are public documents are sufficiently developed to be self-contained. Unlike truly private diaries, they form coherent, free-standing texts that are more or less self-explanatory if the entries are read in toto. This salient difference is illustrated by half a paragraph selected at random from Virginia Woolf's diary. She begins: "On Easter Monday we went up to visit the Murrays & see Hampstead Heath." A private diarist would have stopped there, but Woolf continues, exploring the dramatic possibilities of a brief scene:

Our verdict was that the crowd at close quarters is detestable; it smells; it sticks; it has neither vitality nor colour; it is a tepid mass of flesh scarcely organised into human life. How slow they walk! How passively & brutishly they lie on the grass! How little of pleasure or pain is in them! But they looked well dressed & well fed; & at a distance among the canary coloured swings & roundabouts they had the look of a picture. It was a summers day—in the sun at least; we could sit on a mound & look at the little distant trickle of human beings eddying round the chief centres of gaiety & filing over the heath & spotted upon its humps. Very little noise they made; the large aeroplane that came flying so steadily over head made more noise than the whole crowd of us. Why do I say 'us'? I never for a moment felt myself one of "them". Yet the sight had its charm: I liked the bladders, & the little penny sticks, & the sight of two slow elaborate dancers performing to a barrel organ in a space the size of a hearthrug. (*Dairy* April 24, 1919, I: 267–8)

Here Woolf has animated Seurat's *Un Dimanche d'été à Sur la Grande Jatte*, evoking its sights, sounds, smells, motion, and activities from perspectives close up and farther away. Although she distances herself from



the "detestable" crowd, by the passage's end she has condescended to some of its pleasures. Readers can understand diaries such as Woolf's without elaborate reinforcement from external sources, although notes are in fact useful to identify brief allusions to people, historical events, literary works, theatrical performances, which Anne Olivier Bell provides in the standard edition.

*Characters, central and subordinate.* In public private diaries, the author creates and presents a central character, herself, as seen through a central consciousness, also herself. When the writer is skilled, both are sophisticated, artistic constructs with a persona analogous to that of the heroine of a drama, who speaks in a distinctive voice. Margo Culley observes that "all diarists are involved in a process, even if largely unconscious, of selecting details to create a persona. . . . The pages of a diary might be thought of as a kind of mirror before which the diarist stands assuming this posture or that" (*A Day at a Time* 12).

In her diary, Anaïs Nin is continually posturing, trying on costumes, makeup, perfume, gestures, glances before the reflections and refractions of others, such as Henry Miller and her psychiatrist, Dr. Allendy. They become her mirror and her mouthpiece, ventriloquizing the author's words and point of view as Alice B. Toklas does for Gertrude Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.<sup>6</sup> Nin uses the other characters as foils to demonstrate her intellectual prowess and physical attractiveness, among other things. When she tells Allendy she can't afford his visits, "he not only reduces his fee by half" but hires her as his research assistant. "I am very flattered," she explains, "I have full confidence in my ability as a writer." She then, in an exhibitionistic passage, its voyeuristic potential enhanced by its presentation as drama, complains:

Anaïs: "I feel like an adolescent girl. . . . My breasts are too small."

Dr. Allendy: "Are they absolutely undeveloped?"

Anaïs: "No." As I flounder in my descriptions, I say: "To you, a doctor, the simplest thing is to show them to you." And I do. And then Dr. Allendy began to laugh at my fears.

Dr. Allendy: "Perfectly feminine, small but well shaped, well outlined in proportion to the rest of your figure, such a lovely figure . . . . You are really lovely, so much grace of movement, charm, so much breeding and finesse of line."  
(*Diary I*: 90–91)

This image is so unexpected and so powerful that it colors our perception of all other images of Anaïs, and indeed of all other women in the diary. Even when she is not onstage at the moment, Nin as character, in league with Nin as author, forces all the other female characters to subordinate

themselves to this incarnation of perfect femininity, grace, finesse, and wisdom. As Spacks notes, “Despite her obsessive introspection,” Nin conveys an external self-portrait “because her concern centers so completely on the creation of effects” and on “her ability to manipulate these effects, to control her environment (different rooms painted different colors . . .), her clothing (“original”), and her companions, in order to show herself to advantage” (*Female Imagination* 305)—a judgment Fitch reinforces throughout *Anaïs*, as in her interpretation of the Allendy scene above (125–26).

This self-focus characterizes other public diaries as well; it seems inevitable, given the diarist’s self-reflexive point of view (though Blodgett says this self-focus is a “contemporary practice, not the typical historical reality” 4). As I have argued elsewhere, through the act of writing, the author not only composes her own character, she moves that character to center stage, becoming the principal actor in the drama of her own story—whether in real life she was a major figure or a bit player in a cast of hundreds or thousands (“Escaping” 101). All others are subordinate, irrespective of their relative importance in real life. Thus we learn about *Mary Chesnut’s* Civil War, not the Civil War of her husband, a U.S. Senator and Confederate aide to Jefferson Davis. Thus we experience Anne Frank’s life in “the Secret Annexe,” and only secondarily the lives of her parents and other companions. The diarist does indeed create “her own society, then shuts the door.”

*Textual transformations.* Extensive revision of diary manuscripts not only changes the form, but sometimes the genre, in an attempt to make sense of one’s life for an external audience. One could make the case that the greater the artistry, the more significantly the revision will depart from the original diary. Agnes Newton Keith and Margaret Sams transformed their diaries of internment in Japanese camps in the Pacific throughout World War II into autobiographies, written after their release, postwar. Keith’s best-selling *Three Came Home* is a story of survival, courage, and grace under pressure. Sams’s *Forbidden Family* is an apologia, the passionate tale of her extramarital liaison, pregnancy, and new family under starvation circumstances. Although Keith was a best-selling author, accustomed to interpreting life as literature, Sams had only one story to tell, and over the course of five major revisions, she told it in *Forbidden Family*—a work that remained unpublished until Sams found a scholarly editor, myself, who knew how to locate an appropriate publisher. Their original diaries are no longer extant, and it is not possible to determine the exact nature of these transformations.

Nevertheless, it is clear from my extended conversations with Sams as I edited her work for publication that she had multiple audiences in mind. I

use her work as a case in point, of the vast diary literature written by amateurs—more ample than the bare-bones line-a-day, but because of the writer's nonprofessional status, not necessarily destined for publication. Sams wrote, as many such diarists do, for her children: her son by her first husband, Bob Sherk, a thoroughly "honest, sincere, good person" (122) who perished as a Japanese prisoner of war while his wife, interned in another prison, was falling deeply in love with Jerry Sams, a fellow internee; the baby born of that liaison who would one day want to know the circumstances of her birth; the Sams's subsequent children and grandchildren-to-be. But a larger, more generalized audience was necessary for Sams to allay the guilt she continued to feel for violating her code that marriage was for life, divorce was "the work of the devil" (119), and adultery was unthinkable. A woman breaking this moral law was, in her opinion, "scarlet," wicked, a pariah to be cast out of her family and shunned by society (121–22, 299). She could never completely lay the ghost to rest; Bob died before she could explain, apologize, ask his forgiveness; his last words to his wife were a smuggled note that he wanted to raise the unborn child as his own. But with guilt, humility, and bravado she could confess what she could not acknowledge to her next-door neighbors, in a narrative written for herself and strangers, unknown women whose judgment she both feared and defied. To do so she had to tell a good story, in which she was the sympathetic heroine, and to provide sufficient contextual information both to explain her passionate decision and to render it justifiable under the circumstances. That she accomplished her aims is apparent from the greatly expanded, revised final text.

*Mary Chesnut's Civil War* is the most extensive published work in English that documents such a textual transformation, in this case, as editor C. Vann Woodward says, from "diary in fact to diary in form" (the title of the introduction)—a blurred genre indeed. Evidently in hopes of publication (which, as with many writers of such works, did not occur during the author's lifetime), Chesnut revised her Civil War diaries on two occasions a decade apart; during the intervals she wrote two unpublished novels. In the revisions, 1875–76 and 1881–85, Chesnut expanded the work to double its original size, nearly 400,000 words (xv–lvii). At the same time that she was elaborating on brief entries, adding new episodes, characters, dialogue, letters, and contextual information, she was also pruning digressions, weeding out trivial and irrelevant material, and eliminating self-deprecating commentary on such matters as her vanity ("My poor [red] eyes. My only decent feature," 64) and her ill temper ("Mr. C very kind, staying with me, & I very bad, wrangling and tormenting him," 65).

Many of these changes significantly enhanced the diary's narrative possibilities. From her retrospective knowledge of the Civil War, Chesnut used her newly honed fictional techniques to transform for postbellum readers brief factual entries into revealing stories of several pages, replete with scenes, themes, characterizations, action, dialogue, shifts in points of view, and social commentary. With a storyteller's instinct for the dramatic, even the ordinary becomes extraordinary. In a typical instance, a single sentence from the entry for June 21–23, 1861, reads: "I woke in the night, heard such a commotion, such loud talking of a crowd—I rushed out, thinking what could they have heard from Virginia, but found only Mrs. Chesnut had smelled a *Smell*—& roused the whole *yard*" (84).

Economy permits quotation of only part of the expanded version (a page and a half): "Last night I was awakened by loud talking and candles flashing everywhere—tramping of feet—growls dying away in the distance, loud calls from point to point in the yard." The sounds and sights are terrifying, "Up I started—my heart in my mouth. Some dreadful thing had happened—a battle—a death—a horrible accident. Miss Sally Chesnut [Mary's sister-in-law] was screaming aloft. . . hoarsely, like a boatswain in a storm." The author dresses quickly, and coming upon "the scene of action" asks "What is it? Any news?" and is answered, "No, no—only mama smells a smell. She thinks something is burning." Whereupon the perspective shifts from the screaming woman to "the whole yard . . . alive—literally swarming" with the "sixty or seventy people kept here to wait upon this household," being given orders by Mr. C. whose "magnificent voice . . . can be heard for miles." Chesnut then offers a critical analysis of the screamer, so sensitive to bad odors that "candles have to be taken out of the room to be snuffed. . . . She finds violets oppressive"; and an equally critical analysis of the "negro village—for whom taxes are paid—and doctors' bills. They earn their daily bread and their large families' food and clothes and house rent by 'waiting in the house.' They rapidly increase and never diminish in numbers," as evidenced by "Maria's three children in two years." The offending odor turns out to be "boiling soap" and smoldering rags on the fire. Chesnut concludes the scene with a riposte to her query of "Any news?" "Good news can keep," the old gentleman [Colonel Chesnut, Mary's father-in-law] answered sharply, "Bad news comes fast enough." So after much mumbling-grumbling, things settled down, and the deadly quiet of Sandy Hill reigned once more" (78–79).

So what will we call *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, this South Carolina woman's *War and Peace* that looks like a diary and reads like a diary written with a novelist's verve and vigor, except a classic?

*Contemporary value.* When private diaries become public documents they transcend the realm of the family legacies and historical records where truly private diaries live. In trusting themselves to speak beyond their diary's pages to an audience of strangers, present and to come, the authors of public diaries—Mary Chesnut, Natalie Crouter, Anne Frank, Anaïs Nin, Margaret Sams, Virginia Woolf—extend the boundaries of the self and the genre to leave a literary legacy for the world.

## NOTES

1. Likewise, Anaïs Nin invited Henry Miller "to write something" in her very public diary (I: 95).
2. Another telling instance of the polish of the professionals' private writings is the fifty-year correspondence between Vita Sackville-West and her husband, Harold Nicolson, both bisexuals, both novelists. In *Portrait of A Marriage* their son, Nigel, uses their letters to prove that "nothing could destroy their love," not even his mother's attempted elopement at age twenty-six with her lover, Violet Treyfusis. Because his parents "were so often apart," partly because of Harold's service in the diplomatic corps and in Parliament, "they wrote to each other thousands of letters, and these formed the warp and woof of their marriage, which was thus continuously enriched and rewoven." "In most marriages," he says, love after a time becomes inarticulate, or is expressed in bed. In their marriage there was no bed, but both, being writers, found infinite pleasure in analysing their emotions. . . . They could reach out over continents to feel the other's pulse and measure it exactly. "Your letter," Harold once wrote Vita from Persia, "makes me feel that distance does not matter, and that loneliness is only a physical, not a spiritual, displacement" (206–7). Nigel Nicolson, of course, has a vested interest in demonstrating that in his parents' marriage of true minds, the letters exchanged between two professional writers provided the matrix of intimate verbal communication that superseded each partner's numerous liaisons with same-sex partners.
3. Noting that "the image is a curious one," Ulrich explains, identifying another occurrence in April, 1798, it was "as though the floorboard, pothooks, and bedsteads had risen against her. . . . A house could be an adversary. Turn your back, and it rippled into disorder. Chairs tipped. Candles slumped. Egg yolks hardened in cold skilletts. Dust settled like snow. Only by constant effort could a woman conquer her possessions" (219).
4. Although Crouter is not a professional writer (indeed, this diary, published thirty-five years after she completed it, is her only book) her work has all the textual features of a public document. In her account of Christmas 1943, in a Japanese-run internment camp of 500 American and British civilians in Baguio, Philippines, December 20–25, Crouter discusses, among other topics: Christmas visits from relatives in military camps (impending, arriving, and one not coming); egalitarian division of labor in camp, in Russia, and in American

families; food (scrounging discarded cabbage leaves, an unusually good dinner); people faking heart trouble to manipulate the camp system; Christmas presents from “outside”; the jailing of fathers of babies born in Manila camp, in defiance of no-cohabitation rule; giving away her teenage daughter June’s outgrown dresses; arrival of Red Cross relief supplies of food and medicine (the first—and only—during the entire war); little children’s amusing sayings; June’s pleased viewing of her handsome father’s photograph as an “outsider” might see it; a list of Japanese words derived from English (“speedo,” “Jeepu”); description of the camp’s Christmas decorations; removal of Old Gold cigarettes from the Red Cross boxes because *Freedom* was written on the packages; rumors of anticipated bombing; crowded conditions in Manila camp in comparison to Baguio; camp’s Christmas pageant; 5 A.M. caroling on Christmas morning; family exchange of handmade presents; Santa’s distribution of camp presents for children; food sent by the Crouters’ former Filipino servants, Japanese imprisonment of one, Natalie’s pride in their dignity and resourcefulness; Crouters’ possessions left behind, “looted, searched, burned;” her aw-shucks reaction to a compliment (“I said I was nothing but a mopper and a waitress”); the gift of a turquoise for June, and discussion of its accompanying Emerson quotation; orderly and exultant distribution of Red Cross boxes; analysis of the contents of the boxes themselves, “breathing American efficiency” and equality, “no discrimination, no special privileges”; the need to remember those “outside who had none;” Christmas dinner; Natalie’s equable resignation to the loss of precious civilian records; her husband Jerry’s Christmas-night summing up, “he never had a better Christmas, and he never expects to” (256–66).

5. That Zlata Filipovic’s *Zlata’s Diary: A Child’s Life in Sarajevo* is modeled on Anne Frank’s is clear from her entry for March 30, 1992: “Hey Diary! You know what I think? Since Anne Frank called her diary Kitty, maybe I could give you a name too. . . . I’m thinking, thinking. . . . I’ve decided. I’m going to call you MIMMY” (27). The naming of “Mimmy” signals Zlata’s (or her parents’) intent to find a public audience for this work, which they obtained within the year: “I’ve just heard that you’re going to be published! You’re coming out for the UNICEF Week! SUPER!” (90). *Zlata’s Diary* illustrates another aspect of writing: whether in a diary or any other medium, desire to emulate a distinguished model (Anne Frank, in this case) does not automatically confer literary distinction on the imitator, nor does Zlata’s conception of an external readership enable her to render the experience as richly as a more mature or sophisticated writer would. In commenting on Zlata’s general artlessness, Francine Prose notes that the only self-consciousness here is that of “self-dramatizing little girls telling all to their diaries” (7).
6. Thus Stein can have her created character Alice B. Toklas say, at the outset of this autobiography-by-*Doppelgänger*:

I may say that only three times in my life have I met a genius and each time a bell within me rang and I was not mistaken, and I may say in each case it was before there was any general recognition of the quality of genius in them. The three geniuses of whom I wish to speak are Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso and Alfred Whitehead. I have met many important people, I have met

several great people but I have only known three first class geniuses and in each case on sight within me something rang. In no one of the three cases have I been mistaken. (5)

The rhetorical domination of threes in this passage, *three times in my life* (with variations, repeated thrice), *three geniuses*, *three first class geniuses*, *three cases*, reinforces Toklas's (really Stein's) holy trinity. Stein uses Alice's voice and persona to canonize herself, a largely unpublished writer of eccentric and uncertain, if not dubious, reputation when the *Autobiography* was published in 1933, in guilt-by-association with two acknowledged geniuses, Picasso and Whitehead.

## Making Essay Connections: Editing Readers for Freshman Writers

*'Tis the good reader that makes the good book; in every book he finds passages which seem . . . unmistakably meant for his ear; the profit of books is according to the sensibility of the reader; the profoundest thought or passion sleeps as in a mine, until it is discovered by an equal mind and heart.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Success"

IT IS FITTING THAT THE RATIONALE FOR READING SHOULD COME FROM AN essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson, America's patron saint of self-reliance. While Emerson asserts that reading is essential for success in general, contemporary American composition teachers assert that reading well is essential for writing well. The rationale of Donald Hall, himself a distinguished essayist and poet, for the seventh edition of *A Writer's Reader* epitomizes the current consensus: "Reading well precedes writing well. Of all the ancestors claimed by a fine piece of prose, the most important is the prose from which the writer learned his craft. Writers learn craft, not by memorizing rules about restrictive clauses, but by striving to equal a standard formed from reading" (xxi).

Hall continues, "A composition course, then, must be two courses, one in reading, another in writing." College students, he says, have been reared on television and "bad prose" in newspapers, popular fiction, textbooks; and they are taught to believe that "words merely stand in for ideas, or carry information on their backs" the way superhighways carry traffic. To become active readers, students must engage the writer's ideas in skeptical, questioning dialogue while learning from the prose of distinguished belletristic essays an intimate, textual integration of idea and expression, "rhythm and image, metaphor and syntax, order of phrase and order of paragraph" (xxi–xxii).

### THE RECENT LOWLY STATUS OF ESSAYS IN THE ACADEMY

After spending nearly a century relegated to the dank basement of the House of Literature, essays—a.k.a. literary nonfiction, creative nonfiction,



belletristic nonfiction, or personal essays—are coming upstairs. Essayists such as Joan Didion, James Baldwin, Stephen Jay Gould, Virginia Woolf, and Alice Walker now join their illustrious predecessors—Montaigne, Bacon, Swift, Addison and Steele, Emerson, and Holmes—as authors of a genre regarded once again as first class, first rate. That the status of the essay, the Cinderella of the literary world, was dubious throughout most of the twentieth century is reflected in E.B. White’s self-deprecating observation that “the essayist, unlike the novelist, the poet, and the playwright, must be content in his self-imposed role of second-class citizen” (Essays vii). With the critics (the ugly stepsisters in this tale) in the ascendancy, the essay was treated in the academy essentially as a utilitarian, efficient means of communicating technical information, its authority and aesthetic quality devalued. How essays were reduced to such a lowly state is not a pretty story.

We could blame Coleridge and his colleagues, who drew a distinction between “the *active* concerns of rhetoric and the *contemplative* ones of literature” (Bizzell and Herzberg 639). We could blame the British university system, for by the mid-nineteenth century, says Donald McQuade, “the British began to formalize this distinction by dividing instruction in rhetoric from belles-lettres, and American universities (led by Johns Hopkins and Harvard) did much the same” (487). We could blame our colleagues. McQuade explains how the academy in the early twentieth century demoted the essay from “a *primary* form of literature” to its standing “as a *secondary* source,” often as “a commentary *on* literature” (486). Literature textbooks, such as Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry*, shaped the ethic and aesthetic of literary study for decades.

And we can blame ourselves for cooperating with, if not condoning, the same value system. For example, in 1988 Chris Anderson’s “Hearsay Evidence” explores the issue of why, as essayist Joseph Epstein says, “it is a sweet time to be an essayist” outside the academy “when the opposite is the case inside” (411). Anderson, himself a sophisticated essayist as well as a composition specialist, concedes that “Coming to the essay we know that we will not be subject to the metafictional and fabulist demands of much contemporary fiction and poetry or to the difficult, mind-jarring analyses of these demands in a [theoretical critical] commentary” (307). Taking heart from Virginia Woolf’s claim that the essay “is the medium which makes it possible for people of ordinary intelligence to communicate their ideas to the world” (“The Common Reader” 150), Anderson finds “the essay an increasingly compelling model,” and is willing to accept “second-class citizenship in exchange for freedom of movement” (307).

As a consequence of the prevailing values, McQuade explains, in the twentieth century the standard first-year composition course reduced the essay's "importance as an emerging subject of independent study" and required students "to produce models of correctness—in spelling, punctuation, syntax, grammar, and expression—that displayed the products of rigorously controlled analyses of literature drawn from a designated list of standard authors" (409). The resulting assumption—"that there is an irrevocable distinction between composition and literature," that literature is "elegant and elite, composition commonplace and *déclassé*"—still dictates the curriculum, as well as the academic pecking order, in numerous American high schools and colleges (490, 491).

Until the past decade, this view also provided the rationale for the existence of essay anthologies, and for their contents. In the English curriculum, the reading of essays has been relegated to first-year composition courses—where it largely remains to this day, except for critical essays read in literature courses. The Essay has been "taught" primarily as an exemplary model of "service" writing in a course that is still identified as a "service" course, so like Cinderella viewed by the stepsisters, the essay has been perceived as a handmaiden to all the other academic disciplines in the university but devoid of literary merit of its own.

#### A GENRE WHOSE TIME HAS COME

The main change in today's English curriculum is not the status of the first-year composition course, whose funding, rationale, and staffing to a large extent are still subject to the familiar hierarchical priorities. The difference lies in the fact that the course materials of first-year composition—essays still and always—are experiencing a renaissance and rehabilitation. There are several reasons for the fact that within the past decade essays, particularly personal essays, are now receiving new respect in the academy. English faculty—critics and composition specialists alike—are discovering what the cognoscenti, lovers and writers of belletristic essays, have always known. Current literary and rhetorical theories—of any and all persuasions—acknowledge the constructed nature of all literary texts, including literary nonfiction. Critics and teachers now understand that the techniques of good writing are as applicable to autobiography and essay writing as to fiction; as a consequence, critical studies of literary nonfiction have increased astronomically in the past two decades (see Bloom and Yu).

Likewise, critical knowledge is translated into pedagogical practice as composition teachers give sophisticated personal writing assignments that reflect what all serious writers know about structure and shape, sounds

and silence, and the voice and persona that undergird the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of writing for an external audience (see chapters four, five, nine). As Douglas Hesse observes, “The power we hold out to students when we encourage them to essay is the power to be like other essayists, to write like authors their teachers read in serious leisure” (141).

Another reason for the current attention being paid to essays, particularly personal belletristic essays, is their recognized utility in addressing the political, cultural, and social issues that first-year composition promotes in initiating new students into the university. Belletristic essayists collectively function as purveyors of political correctness and a multicultural perspective. Indeed, nearly all contemporary essay collections for composition courses reflect a range of multicultural authors, balanced according to gender, ethnicity, class, religion, sexual preference.

Consider the range of authors in just one representative essay collection from the approximately one hundred first-year composition readers published in 1993 and 1994, *The Presence of Others: Readings for Critical Thinking and Writing*, edited Andrea Lunsford (a liberal) and John Ruskiewicz (“an academic and political conservative,” xiv): Adrienne Rich, Camille Paglia, Shelby Steele, bell hooks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Sojourner Truth, William Least Heat Moon, Leslie Marmon Silko, Rosario Morales, Linda Chavez, Norman Podhoretz, Mike Rose, P.J. O’Rourke, and Allan Bloom. The writing of such authors is intellectually complex, technically sophisticated, and provocative. *The Presence of Others* includes four of the dozen most frequently anthologized essayists appearing in the contemporary pedagogical canon: Joan Didion, Maxine Hong Kingston, Lewis Thomas, Virginia Woolf. Omitted are seven more of the top twelve: Russell Baker, Annie Dillard, Loren Eiseley, Nancy Mairs, N. Scott Momaday, George Orwell and E.B. White (see Afterword).

#### WHY EDIT YET ANOTHER READER?

Given the new legitimacy of essays in the academy, as well as their preponderance in the first-year composition curriculum, the prospect of editing a collection of essays seems enticing, especially if a publisher is projecting sales of forty to fifty thousand copies over four years. An easy task, good money, a soupçon of scholarly respectability, enhancement of one’s teaching—who could resist? Dream on. Or, since I will address these reasons below, read on.

*I want to become a better teacher.* Improving one’s own teaching may be the only certain outcome of editing any textbook. To edit a reader responsibly, the editor needs to have a clear sense of what constitutes

good writing—in print and in class, even if this changes over time—how good writing can be achieved, and a variety of ways in which it can be taught. Thus, the prospective editor needs to have a sense of at least four key concerns in order to make appropriate selections and to determine how to use them. First, the editor needs a coherent philosophy of the ideal course to which the anthology pertains. Will the course emphasize critical thinking, argumentation, multicultural understanding, a particular topic, style or other rhetorical strategies—and will the course emphasize these things in general or as they reflect a particular disciplinary area? Second, what materials will best reinforce this philosophy? The work of major thinkers, belletristic writers, social commentators (including or excluding journalists), public speakers? Is this philosophy best addressed by a historical spread of authors, or by contemporary selections? By men and women equally? Will it include exemplary student papers? Will it contain fiction, poetry, artwork, or photographs? If so, which ones? Why?

Third, which potential selections are teachable and for what reasons? Some good reasons for inclusion (or rejection) are the following:

- Appropriate level of difficulty for the intended teachers and readers. How much does one have to know or learn in order to teach this book and to understand its contents?
- Appropriate length—that is, the essay’s original length. (To maintain the integrity of an essay’s form, content, and rhetorical design—and one’s own integrity as an editor, one should *not excerpt*.) Is the book designed for long analyses of long pieces, short analyses of short pieces, or some mix? Will a given essay be used as an exemplary rhetorical model, as a stimulus to discussion, and/or in connection with other pieces in the book—say, to form a cluster for argument?
- Relevance of the topic or point of view. Does the piece address “enduring” truths, or topics of more limited or ephemeral interest? If the latter, how quickly is it likely to go out of date? Does it have resonance—intellectual and aesthetic—with other selections in the reader? Is it politically correct? Should it be?
- Rhetorical versatility—for reading, discussion, and writing. Any essay enriches a textbook if it can be used in a variety of ways. Indeed, Hall and Emblen point out the difficulties of arbitrary classification: “No piece of real prose is ever so pure as our systems of classification.” They continue,

Although an essay may contain Division, or Process Analysis, or an example of Example, the same essay is likely to use three or four other patterns as well. . . . Thematic organizations . . . have similar flaws; is E.B. White’s theme in “Once More to the Lake” Mortality? Aging? Youth and

Age? or, How I Spent My Summer Vacation? [Or, one could add, Parent and Child, Father and Son, the Self in the Setting, Once More to Self Discovery . . . .] (xxiii)

Fourth, what instructional apparatus will the collection include? How concise or elaborate will it be? Apparatus, however minimal or extensive, consists of some or all of the following: discussions of how to read, think, and write critically; discussions of rhetorical principles; biographical, rhetorical, and/or critical introductions to the authors and selections; study questions on individual selections, focusing on such matters as content, rhetorical strategies, form, and style; suggestions for reading, discussion, and writing on individual selections or related pieces; a glossary of rhetorical terms; textual glosses; workbooks, in print or computer form; an instructor's guide. If the collection will include an instructor's guide will this guide contain answers to the study questions? Interpretive essays on the book's themes or rhetorical issues? Suggestions for teaching? Discussions of current research in composition studies, and citations of professional literature? Sample student papers?

As with any expert performance, the polished result—in this case, a gleaming, state-of-the-art reader—looks deceptively simple. Yet, as with any expert performance, each new book requires an enormous amount of work—let's say, a minimum of one thousand hours. The genuine pleasure comes in the initial task: spending over three hundred hours to survey the field, discover what the competition is doing, and read potential materials. Then comes the work; at least ten hours to edit each selection (most essay anthologies contain sixty-five to eighty selections) and write and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite the apparatus—totaling some six to eight hundred hours. This does not include time spent reading the relevant professional literature in composition studies; learning to write clear, unambiguous, friendly prose that neither preaches nor condescends to teachers or students (let me count the ways you can say *you* or *I*); or trying out portions of the manuscript on one's own or others' students. Nor does it include time spent locating biographical, rhetorical, and critical information; tracking down original sources and securing copyright permissions; copying and preparing the manuscript for publication; editing and proofreading the page proofs; and—a final, time-consuming burden—preparing for the publisher's advertising department a market report that analyzes one's own book in relation to the competition. The meter is still running; better add on another five hundred hours. That's thirty hours of work per week for fifty weeks; or, more realistically, fifteen hours per week spread over two years. How could one's teaching fail to benefit from such a stupendous investment of time and thought?

*I want to make an original contribution to the field.* Don't count on it. Textbooks do not usually invent knowledge: they transmit existing paradigms and information. Textbooks are thus reactive repositories of the current state of knowledge in whatever discipline they represent; teachers aren't likely to adopt a reader with a largely unfamiliar table of contents. A reasonably familiar textbook is comforting to teachers who are assigned the course at the last minute, as many are, with little opportunity for advance preparation. Moreover, some uniformity of content is desirable in an introductory, multisectioned course where large numbers of students change sections during the first few weeks and where students are held responsible for some core body of knowledge and development of skills at the semester's end. So there is pressure, from within the field and from publishers, to clone texts that already have a following rather than to invent works *de novo*.

Thus, the innovations textbooks offer, if any, are much more likely to be pedagogical and pragmatic than theoretical. For example, two conspicuously innovative rhetoric books that have translated rhetorical theory into pedagogical practice are Edward P.J. Corbett's Aristotelean *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, and Young, Becker, and Pike's application of tagmemic linguistics, *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*. Both books have profoundly influenced teachers, but were too intellectually sophisticated for first-year students and required too much background knowledge from the teacher to gain widespread use in first-year composition. The Corbett text, in fact, is more often taught in graduate courses, as is Donald Murray's simpler *A Writer Teaches Writing*. Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* and Ken Macrorie's *Telling Writing*, both expressivist rhetorics, are exceptional among innovative pedagogies that have had widespread adoption in first-year composition courses. They're reader-friendly; they're written with clarity, simplicity, and good humor; and they contain abundant illustrations. Yet all five of these books are rhetorics, not readers, and have much more space to expand on their subject than readers do. That the first editions of all of these works were published between 1965 and 1973 implies that trade publishers were more willing to risk publishing innovative works a quarter century ago than they are now.

*I want this reader to be a powerful influence in the field.* The nature of anthologies—which are, after all, compilations of other peoples' writings rather than the editor's own—makes it hard for any editor to make a major impact on the field (but see Lauter, *Canons passim*, especially "Reconstructing," 96–113). Essay collections of any sort are a means of providing brief glimpses (usually the highlights) of a vast field of which the

anthology's readers might otherwise be unaware: the reader's introduction to the field is comparable to studying art through viewing the Mona Lisa's smile, Boticelli's scallop shell (with or without Venus), or Michaelangelo's touching fingertips of God creating Adam.

To make a powerful and innovative selection, the editor must cull essays, book chapters, and illustrative paragraphs from a wide range of works. Anthologies, even pioneer works, are usually a mix of 50 percent familiar readings, 25 percent new or unfamiliar works by familiar authors, and 25 percent new works by unfamiliar authors. The depth of the editor's knowledge of the field (including authors, genres, individual writings, as well as pedagogical theory and research in composition) and the opportunity to be both innovative and influential is apparent both in unusual selections and in how all the selections are treated.

There are three possible avenues for substantial editorial innovation, and hence the greatest likelihood of long-term influence. The first is to be the first compiler of much-needed material in the field. Knowledgeably selected readings from a vast body of primary material will often be the student's (and perhaps the adopting teacher's) only exposure to that material. For example, Bizzell and Herzberg's *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, intends in 1266 large, tightly packed pages ("fifty-six selections from forty-four important figures," from Gorgias to Cixous and Kristeva) to provide—primarily for graduate students and teachers—"a thorough survey of the tradition of rhetoric," reintroducing out-of-print and inaccessible authors, and "eliminating the need for separate paperbacks" (book jacket). Although somewhat comparable collections have appeared since *The Rhetorical Tradition* was published in 1990, to be first with the most establishes a powerful priority of place. There is no comparable, widely used first-year anthology, except perhaps Lee Jacobus's *World of Ideas*, a book intended to enable "students in first-year composition courses . . . to read and write about challenging works by great thinkers" (v). The current edition of this work contains thirty-five unusually long selections (averaging fifteen pages, as opposed to five in most anthologies) by Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Thoreau, Darwin, Marx, Freud, Levi-Strauss, and Simone Weil.

The second route to innovation is to be the innovator of a unique pedagogical method embedded in the reader and its instruction apparatus, in the introductions to the subject(s) and authors and in suggestions for reading and writing about the anthologized material. When such a work is to be widely adopted, its attendant pedagogy is adopted, as well. Though it has little apparatus, William Smart's *Eight Modern Essayists* incorporates a

strong pedagogical philosophy: to expose students to clusters of writing by modern authors memorable for their style and trenchant point of view and expect some semblance of emulation in form and style. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Ways of Reading* has a much more directive pedagogy. It not only introduces students (and many of their teachers) to "serious" writing—"long and complicated texts" by Gloria Anzaldúa, John Berger, Michel Foucault, Paulo Freire, and Adrienne Rich—it also provides a method of reading text against text that invites students "to be active, critical readers," by "open[ing] up the familiar world and mak[ing] it rich and puzzling" (vi).

The pedagogical philosophy of Bartholomae and Petrosky directly contradicts that of most of the other first-year composition readers currently in print, except perhaps Jacobus's: "We avoided the short set-pieces you find in so many anthologies" because they "misrepresent the act of reading." Such commonly anthologized essays "can be read in a single sitting; they make arguments that can be easily paraphrased; they solve all the problems they raise; they wrap up Life and put it into box" (vi). By turning reading "into an act of appreciation" rather than a critical dialectic, such short selections imply that students, too, should "write a piece that is similarly tight and neat and self-contained." Instead of implying that the only thing student readers need to do is to "get the point," Bartholomae and Petrosky see students as beginning "with confusion and puzzlement" to "put together fragments," gradually creating a coherent text of their own through "writing and rewriting" (vi).

The third avenue for innovation is to be the first (or most knowledgeable) compiler of material on a topic of consuming interest, current or perennial. In the 1950s and 60s, casebooks of primary materials appeared, focusing on such topics as the Salem witch trials (implicitly analogous to the 1950s political witch hunts), on the Sacco and Vanzetti case, on the nature of justice in general, on Melville's *Billy Budd*, and on Faulkner's *The Bear*. At intervals other topical compilations (single theme readers) are published; for example currently there are readers on gender and on ecology. Few survive beyond a first edition; none has been in print longer than a decade, a duration which, short though it is, seems to denote a potential textbook classic.

#### THE INCREDIBLE INTERTEXTUALITY OF READERS

Nevertheless, innovation of any of these three kinds is more the exception than the rule. Approximately fifty readers are published each year, divided evenly between new and revised works (see Smitten, Webb). To



call attention to their conspicuous intertextuality is a polite way of saying that many of these works, however intellectually and pedagogically sophisticated, have a strong family resemblance; canonical authors, even canonical essays (such as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and E.B. White's "Once More to the Lake"), comprise at least fifty percent of any given textbook. Another twenty-five percent of most current textbooks is devoted to distinguished writings by other ethnic and minority authors only slightly less familiar—Judith Ortiz Cofer, Zora Neale Hurston, Amy Tan, Louise Erdrich, Gary Soto, among others. Bartholomae and Petrosky have accurately characterized the set-piece pedagogy of these works. Is it possible or even desirable for yet another editor to work so long and hard to replicate yet another Son of Reader III?

The answer is, yes, if the prospective editor wants the book to be published commercially. Publishers' offerings are analogous to automobile manufacturers' models, from the bottom to the top of the line: each publisher has a stripped-down, basic model; a general-purpose model; a minivan; a truck; a sportscar; and an elegant, fine-tuned top-of-the-line model. In a sense, each publisher's sales representative is promoting books that compete not only against other publishers' comparable models, but against other works in the publisher's own line. Indeed, when publishers sign a book, they do so to fill a particular niche in their line. They don't want books that are totally different from the competition; they want books that resemble the competitors in significant ways while making some changes. Promises notwithstanding, textbook editors cannot expect monogamous fidelity from their publishers, who are more likely to cast a host of competing books to the winds and see which ones float.

*I want to achieve academic recognition for my essay collections.* Whether textbooks "count" as evidence of research or of pedagogy (or neither) depends on the evaluators' criteria, institutional and individual. Untenured faculty might consider devoting that fifteen hundred hours to shoring up a research publication record, delaying anthology editing until their scholarly reputation is assured by other means.

*I want to make money from my edited textbooks.* It's not wise to count on making money from edited collections. Publishers commonly estimate that to warrant reprinting, a book must sell between twenty and forty thousand copies over the lifetime of its current edition, usually three to four years. This sales expectation is unduly optimistic. Conservatively, the two hundred anthologies in print in any given year would have to sell one to two million *brand new* copies per year to reach this level. Even if two

million students took first-year composition each year and seventy-five percent of these were enrolled in courses requiring a reader, at least two-thirds would buy used books, which generate no new sales. Thus, a more realistic estimate of annual sales of new copies of all readers combined is a half million copies per year—averaging 2500 copies of any given book, or ten thousand total new sales over a four-year period. With customized publishing, desktop publishing, and the capability of any teacher or any bookstore to generate a custom-designed anthology, I assume that even this total sales figure of ten thousand is being substantially eroded even as I write this. But anthology sales are not distributed evenly over the market, so even this conservative figure is generous for many unestablished works.

If one's royalty were a generous two dollars per copy, that twenty thousand dollars might be a welcome supplement to an academic salary, even though it represents approximately \$13.33 per hour of time spent on a first edition. The hope is for a book to go into a second and subsequent editions, which (according to citations in the annual *WPA Bibliographies of Writing Textbooks*) happens in less than ten percent of the anthologies published in the past twenty years. In later editions, which contain only twenty-five to thirty percent of new material, the time spent on revision is considerably less than on the first edition, and the remuneration is proportionately higher. But wait! Publishers deduct anywhere between fifty and one hundred percent of the permissions costs from the editor's royalties. If most of the material is copyrighted (and most will be) the costs will average between three and four hundred dollars per item; seventy selections would cost between twenty-one and twenty-eight thousand dollars. Thus, royalties vanish; most essay anthologists are lucky to break even. That editors of anthologies have become the publishers' unpaid laborers is apparent only in retrospect.

#### A CODA

I offer a coda to this cautionary tale, from my perspective as editor of three essay collections for first-year composition over the past thirty years. Two of these have remained in print (in various editions) for longer than the critical initial decade; the votes aren't in on the third yet. Like most commercially viable readers on the market, these works are state-of-the-art in implied theory, sound in pedagogy, engaging to read, provocative to teach from. My professional reputation is largely independent of these anthologies, as is my bank account. I have worked with some of the best editors in the business, knowledgeable, assiduous, and pleasant, and my books have been promoted better than most of the competition. Yet if I had it to do over again, I emphatically would not.

I'd guess that nowhere on earth are people born lusting to be essay anthologists when they grow up. Editing anthologies, in which the editor's creativity and innovation can generally be measured out in the most minuscule of coffee spoons, is (unless one hits the jackpot) ultimately unrewarding—intellectually, professionally, and financially. What one learns about teaching composition drops precipitously after the first edition of the first anthology. One can make many more substantial contributions to the state of professional knowledge by conducting original research, by writing belletristic essays that other people can edit, or by offering cautionary tales such as the one you are now reading. And one can have a better time.

## *The Importance of External Reviews in Composition Studies*

*“A slow sort of country!” said the Queen. “Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”*

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

**A**TENURE REVIEW, AS SAM JOHNSON OBSERVED OF AN IMPENDING HANG-  
ing, wonderfully focuses the mind. During one particularly interesting period in my life, in the course of several moves to accommodate a dual-career marriage, I underwent four tenure reviews in seven years. In recent years, comfortably tenured, I routinely serve as an external evaluator of English Departments and writing programs, as well as an external reviewer of scholarship in numerous cases of tenure and promotion—not to mention grant proposals, fellowship applications, and submissions to journals and presses. In the immortal words of Ann Landers, I’ve “been there, honey.” As my mind wonderfully focused on the nature of these myriad reviews in preparation for this chapter, I was forcibly reminded of how variable and subjective the process is, how political, and ultimately, how helpful reviews, of individual scholarship and of entire programs, can be to both candidate and institution, if done well.

### ELASTIC CRITERIA FOR TENURE AND PROMOTION

Whatever the local departmental or institutional definitions of *teaching*, *scholarship*, and *service* may be, their actual meaning resides in interpretations more or less variable, as determined by diverse review committees, chairpersons, deans, and other administrators. Because the nature of academic work is diverse and ever-changing, God (or Godot, if you prefer) *has* to be in the details. There’s no way a school, or a department, or for that matter a discipline, can anticipate the wide range of developments in the field or

in the possible work its faculty will do from one year to the next. Individual reviewers and committees must have enough flexibility to exercise their sense of the current state of the art, the cutting edge, the retrograde.

In *scholarship*, for instance, what is the right amount and nature of publication? What is the pecking order among journals and presses—and is it different for composition and rhetoric than for literature? If not refereed, is a publication beyond the pale? Are single-authored works worth more than collaborations? How are edited volumes or collections to be weighted? What is the status, if any, of on-line “publications”? Do reviews “count”? Do textbooks? Workbooks? Software? Instructional videos? Or are the latter four evidence of teaching rather than scholarship? Or some hybrid? How, if at all, should a personnel review treat work submitted but not accepted, work in progress, unfunded grant proposals? Each of these questions has, perforce, innumerable temporary answers, each embedded in a particular context. Although we wouldn’t have it any other way, this necessary flexibility requires continual fine-tunings that depend on a complicated confluence of subjective judgments.

The elastic nature of such standards may be even more conspicuous in rhetoric and composition. Here diverse research methodologies (including case studies, ethnographies, and quantitative empirical investigation) and emphasis on teaching and administration, although normative, are not necessarily understood by peers in more traditional literary fields. Should directing a writing program be considered teaching, because the director usually trains teachers, develops curricula, and may offer consultations or workshops to other faculty members and public school teachers? Or service, for everything provided is a service to the program’s constituents? Or—as Boyer might argue—scholarship, reflecting the theoretical and intellectual basis, and biases, of the discipline and applying them to diverse student populations, inside and outside of traditional classrooms? How can such teaching (or service or scholarship) be evaluated? Through students’ progress—in the course, throughout their undergraduate studies, or on the job? Cost of delivery of services? The director’s ability to keep the program under control and out of the hair of the other faculty? Community outreach and articulation with the area high schools?

The fact remains that, despite the best efforts of schools and professional organizations to establish and enforce uniform, objective standards for tenure and promotion, departments and institutions still have the flexibility, born of criteria which are variable of necessity, to retain and promote the people they want to keep and to wash out the rest. To rephrase a signal idea from *Alice in Wonderland*, my guess is that in most reviews for tenure

and promotion, the verdict is reached first, implicitly, and the justification is adduced afterward, when the evidence is formally examined. These may be fighting words in a litigious era where people talk in code instead of making the reasons explicit. Nevertheless, I would contend after having served as department chair and on numerous committees at relatively benign schools, internal reviewers are in for no surprises, although the candidates themselves may be, for their reviewers' decisions will reflect the prevailing norms of their intramural culture (see chapter six, "Teaching College English," and Torgovnick, *Crossing*, chapter four). In such a culture, external reviews—of programs and of individuals' work—are necessary.

#### THE NECESSITY OF EXTERNAL REVIEWS

External reviews are necessary, not because the reviewers are any more objective than individual departments or institutions—they're not—but because they're *removed* from them, and therefore at least in theory, free of local concerns, including alignments in departmental feuds and their sense of current priorities. Although many English departments now hire specialists in composition and rhetoric, in most departments their numbers are not large. Thus their tenure and promotion will be determined by colleagues from another culture, most likely, literary studies. It is particularly important for such candidates' work to be commented on by external experts in composition and rhetoric chosen, through suggestions from both the candidates and the department chair, because of their national reputations. These external reviewers can be expected not only to know a great deal about the discipline they represent and to understand its national, perhaps international, implications, but also to be highly partisan toward it. How could they be otherwise?

In the course of the review—whether on a site visit to a writing program or in a letter evaluating the candidate's scholarship—the reviewer becomes an advocate for that discipline, though not necessarily for the individual candidate. The external reviewer's primary task, although I have never seen it stated in any departmental or institutional charge to a reviewer, is to *interpret* the nature of the candidate's work or program for the actual and potential readers of the report, the department, the dean, the university review committee(s), the provost—and, should tenure be denied, for anyone else who might read the documents during appeal.

If done with thoroughness and care—following, for instance, the ADE and WPA standards for external reviews—a thoughtful reviewer's report will *educate* its readers, even those who think they already know what the rapidly changing field of composition studies is, or does, or can do. (If it

better fits your needs, substitute *writing program*, *freshman English*, or another alternative for *composition studies* in that sentence.) As Rowe notes, “Even the writing of ephemeral evaluations. helps constitute a national and an international scholarly community.” This is an extension of “our teaching mission both in the classroom and in our professional exchanges” (48–49). The reviewer’s interpretations of anyone’s work will need to explain to specialists in other areas of English studies, or other disciplines entirely, the *nature* of that work, its actual and potential dimensions, and its implications and consequent significance, at the departmental and institutional levels and in the profession at large. This may involve *translation* of the candidate’s normative language, concepts, and values into those the readers can understand and appreciate.

#### A CHARACTERISTIC CASE

Let us consider the issues involved in a characteristic case. Often—some would argue too often, though I would not—a brand new Ph.D., let’s call her Alice,<sup>1</sup> with a specialization in composition studies is hired to direct the English Department’s, and so the college’s, writing program. A minimal list (after all, you readers are busy people) of her duties follows. This is an embellishment of the typical composition specialist’s job described in Slevin.

Alice plans the freshman composition curriculum, coordinates it with upper-division writing courses, revises it annually, and oversees the summer placement of incoming students into the appropriate courses. She appoints and teaches the new TAs and adjuncts (a modest ten per year) how to teach composition, formally through a one-semester course each year and informally through a mentoring program which involves the more experienced part-timers (some twenty-five in all). Every year she evaluates the writing portfolios of all the new teachers’ students, and she provides both a conference and a written personnel evaluation of each teacher every year. She writes institutional grant proposals to secure computer classrooms and a campus-wide writing center and then, because funds are tight, teaches and monitors the TAs assigned to work in these areas. She chairs the English Department’s Freshman English Committee, and serves on the university committee inaugurating a writing-across-the-disciplines program. She is continually trouble shooting as well as negotiating with the department chair and the dean over class size, program funding, and hiring.

Alice is given one course released time each semester, a twenty-hour a-week graduate assistant throughout the academic year, a work-study student for ten hours per week during the summer, and pay for one extra summer month. She shares department secretarial services. Like other

faculty members, she is expected to attend professional meetings, to publish, and in other ways to be professionally active. Although she is a new faculty member, Alice is in fact expected to do as much administrative work as her department chair, although without his institutional power.

If Alice does her work well, much of it will be invisible or buried in reports and statistical compilations. Only those who have held comparable positions, including most of the external evaluators whose judgment might be called upon during a tenure review, can fully understand the demands, pressures, potential, and constraints under which Alice works.

#### External review of the writing program

Because Alice's work as WPA is remote from the experience of many who will evaluate her tenure file, it can be extremely helpful to have an external review of the writing program the year before tenure review, in order to put on the record a knowledgeable, fair-minded yet sympathetic analysis of the director's work. Two reports are crucial in such a review: the program self-study, prepared in advance of the visit, usually written or coordinated by the writing director; and the response of the external evaluator (or evaluation team) to both the report and the campus visit.

The program self-study customarily addresses such matters as curriculum (including philosophy, courses, instructional methods and materials, responses to student writing, and assessment), faculty working conditions and development, and various aspects of program administration (see the WPA self-study guidelines in Edward White 304–13). It highlights program goals, strengths, problems and inadequacies. The evaluator's report should address the same issues and others, if necessary, as well as commend successes and suggest solutions to difficulties (see Beidler; McLeod; and Edward White, chapter twelve).

The self-study anatomizes the writing program and lays out the director's track record, and the evaluator's response assesses both. So the external evaluator (or evaluation team) is collaborating with the writing director and the department to strengthen the program and, if the evaluation is being conducted the year before a tenure vote, to provide evidence for the director's tenure review. External program reviews are not necessarily or uniformly favorable. But their analysis of existing deficits and problems often deflects potential criticism of the director by identifying institutional difficulties, such as underfunding and lack of administrative support.

#### External review of scholarship

Alice's scholarship, as well as her work as writing director, figures in her review for tenure and promotion. Some people might ask whether she



should be judged according to the same criteria afforded faculty peers who teach somewhat more but have few if any administrative duties. I believe that, to prevent composition studies specialists from being stigmatized by a double standard, the same qualitative criteria must apply to all. Of course, such criteria, and the relative weighting of individual areas of scholarship, teaching, and service, may—and should—be adjusted by the department and university review committees when a candidate carries the sort of administrative burden Alice does.

In reviewing candidates' work for tenure and promotion to Associate Professor, I use the following criteria, applicable equally to scholarship in composition studies and literature:

1. Is the candidate aware of the major and some minor dimensions of his/her research area, including pertinent research issues, methodologies, and significant literature?
2. If so, in what ways does the candidate draw on the established body of research in the field?
3. In what ways is the candidate contributing to the ongoing research in the field? Synthesizing, summarizing, or interpreting the research of others to audiences unfamiliar with this? Using others' research as the basis for investigations into new areas? Making innovations in methodology or theory?
4. If either of the latter, how significant does the candidate's ongoing research appear to be? Minor (either going over old ground, or dealing with peripheral or trivial issues or with trivial aspects of a potentially significant issue)? Middle-level, representing some solid contributions to the existing state of knowledge or state of the methodological art? (Such research can usually be extended or expanded, or can lead to additional areas; it's good work on which to build.) High-level, representing innovative thinking or innovative methodology that will be on the cutting edge of the field, that will influence the work of subsequent researchers, and that will engender other significant related research projects, of the candidate as well as others?
5. Has the candidate made significant contributions to the discipline through participation in national and/or regional professional organizations, or establishment of a teaching or critical canon or curriculum? Has the candidate aided in the professional development of others, faculty or students?

How the candidate's review committee and department employs and weights these, or any other criteria, is beyond the outside evaluator's control. The evaluator can only be clear and emphatic about the quality and importance of the candidate's work. When, as in Alice's case, a WPA is a candidate for tenure/promotion, the evaluator also has an obligation to demonstrate how each criterion is applicable to the work the writing director has been hired to do (see Council of Writing Program Administrators "Guidelines").

Thus, my view of materials to be evaluated expands considerably the conventional materials that Rowe expects the external reviewer to address. If Alice has developed a freshman curriculum, for instance, the external reviewer should be supplied with materials that will indicate its philosophy, underlying scholarship, and quality. In addition to conventional publications in scholarly journals and books, these could include textbooks, instructional software, workshop handouts, curriculum guides, advice to teachers in the writing program, syllabi, writing assignments, graded papers, portfolio summaries, and student evaluations—preferably written commentary.<sup>2</sup>

By increasing the scope of materials reviewed beyond the conventional books, articles, and conference papers, the external reviewer of candidates in composition studies, affirming Boyer's views, is implicitly lobbying for their legitimacy in a tenure review. The home team may, at any level, elect to ignore these materials and may, consequently, discount the external reviewer's evaluation. Nevertheless, these materials become and remain part of the candidate's record, for all to consider—or to reconsider if a negative decision is appealed.

## CONCLUSION

That English Departments are changing to incorporate experts in composition studies into their mainstream faculty is unmistakable, as Bettina Huber's recent reports to the ADE and MLA ("Women," "Changing," "Recent," "Survey") indicate. That the criteria enabling the tenuring of such experts are being expanded and revised is less certain.

Conventional literary faculty members should derive their view of composition studies research from the major work—intellectual, theoretical, pedagogical—in the field. Instead, far too many adhere to the view represented in Richard Marius's surly indictment of the work in composition studies as essentially pragmatic and unintellectual:

I maintain that, against the background of the present *practical* state of the discipline, all the research going on in composition and rhetoric matters not at all. I can think of no book or article devoted to research or theory that has made a particle of difference in the general teaching of composition for the past twenty or thirty years—and I can think of a great many commonly held assumptions in the discipline that are supported by no major research at all.

One cannot therefore consider in any realistic way the state of scholarship in composition without calling attention to the woeful condition of the discipline itself that renders all scholarship merely ornamental. Composition remains overwhelmingly practical . . . the most important books are textbooks [atheoretical and uninformed by research] ("Composition Studies" 466).

In this myopic reading of the discipline, composition studies is a lost cause. If Marius were right, either prevailing criteria for tenure and promotion would have to change dramatically to reward atheoretical, unimaginative recycling of stale, ineffectual pedagogy or else no specialist in composition studies would be tenurable. Fortunately, this is not the case.

To rebut Marius is beyond the scope of the discussion here; Donald McQuade's essay on "Composition and Literary Studies," following Marius's in *Redrawing the Boundaries*, provides a necessary corrective. And a wealth of notable composition research books and articles provide *prima facie* evidence of sophisticated theory, wide reading, keen critical intelligence, and humane understanding of politics, philosophy, and pedagogy. Three prizewinning works published since 1990 are representative of current scholarship in composition studies at the highest level in Criterion 4, mentioned earlier: Kurt Spellmeyer's *Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition*; Susan Miller's *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*; and Lester Faigley's *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition*.

Academia, however avant garde intellectually, is in governance wedded to tenure and promotion review procedures that make it, as Lewis Carroll's Queen observed, "A slow sort of country" where "it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!" Composition studies faculty members, whether candidates for tenure and promotion or their external reviewers, know this running metaphor all too well. In both research and administration, as current work indicates, we are of necessity on a fast track. There is no other place.

## NOTES

1. The choice of a woman for this example is deliberate. (See Holbrook; chapter sixteen, "I Want"; and Miller, chapter four, "The Sad Women in the Basement: Images of Composition Teaching.") The following list of duties is an embellishment of the typical composition specialist's job described in Slevin. See also the Council of Writing Program Administrators' guidelines for WPA positions; Carter and McClelland; and Roen.
2. Conventional, institution-wide course evaluations are based on an efficiency model rewarding large-scale lecture courses that deliver large amounts of material in a clear, organized fashion with little interchange between students and lecturer. This model does not apply very well to the messy, improvisatory,

collaborative nature of many writing classrooms. Moreover, short- or long-term, small- or large-scale, institution-wide assessment programs are freighted with difficulties (see Witte and Faigley; Edward White, chapters 11–13; Greenberg et al.; and the WPA self-study guidelines).

PART IV

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*Writing Program Administration  
as a Creative Enterprise*



## *I Want a Writing Director*

**I** BELONG TO THAT CLASSIFICATION OF ACADEMICS KNOWN AS WRITING directors. I am a Writing Director. And, not altogether incidentally, I am an untenured female assistant professor.\*

Not too long ago a male colleague appeared on the scene fresh from a recent tenure review. He has never taught freshman English since leaving graduate school, and now that he is safely tenured he can refuse to do so if ever asked. I thought about his situation while I was grading freshman essays, and I thought about it again while I was preparing the handouts for the writing center tutors. And again during a meeting of the ESL staff. I pondered his status fleetingly during a training session of new TAs and adjuncts. And several times while scheduling the next semester's composition courses. It suddenly occurred to me that I, too, want a Writing Director.

I want a Writing Director who will keep the writing program out of my hair. I want a Writing Director who will hire a cadre of part-time comp teachers to teach all the freshpersons. I want the Writing Director to be a woman and to hire primarily women because women are more nurturing, they are usually available on the campus where their husbands or other Significant Others teach, and besides, they will work for a lot lower salary than men and can get along without benefits. The money my school saves by hiring these part-timers can be applied toward my full-time salary. Yes, I realize that my wish violates the "CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards"—but it's their life or mine.

I want a Writing Director who will assign the part-timers to teach four courses a semester so that my full-time load can be maintained at two courses. I want a Writing Director who will teach the same courses that she directs so that she will understand the needs of the students and the staff and of course I want the Writing Director to be available to fill in for

teachers who can't make it to class. After all, I need the time to work on my critical study of *Male Bonding in Paradise Regained* so I can make a strong case for tenure.

I want the Writing Director to have the part-timers teach the freshpersons to write decent paragraphs and spell correctly so that I won't have to bother with such trivia when, as upperclasspersons, they take my advanced courses. I want the Writing Director to have the part-timers teach freshpersons the rudiments of literary criticism so I can focus my courses on theory. I want the Writing Director to have the part-timers make sure the freshpersons know how to use the library, how to do computer searches, and how to use the proper citation format. Furthermore, the Writing Director should insist that the part-timers have their students write multiple drafts, and respond in detail to each version, on their papers and in conferences, no matter how much time it takes; a stitch in time will save nine of mine.

I want a Writing Director who will see publishers' representatives, read their brochures, order sample copies of textbooks, stock the staffroom library, and reshelve the books. I want a Writing Director who will keep the computers in shape, and who will be ecologically sound enough to recycle the used computer printouts. Yet although I and my colleagues are politically correct, as can readily be discerned from the enlightened level of my discourse, we will need a few creature comforts. I want a Writing Director who will take care of our needs so that we feel comfortable, who will keep the coffee pot full, bring in Danish for our morning snacks, and serve wine—properly chilled—and cheese at our staff meetings. I want a Writing Director who will clean up the mess afterward.

I want a Writing Director who will administer placement tests and write reports and grant proposals passionately and eagerly when required and who will make sure that the Dean is satisfied. I want a Writing Director sensitive to the demands of parents, the media, the trustees, and the state legislature, a Writing Director who will fend off lawsuits, if necessary, and pillorying by the press. And of course, I want a Writing Director who will not demand attention when I am preoccupied with my scholarly work, and who will remain faithful to my needs so that I do not have to clutter up my intellectual life with administrative details. And I want a Writing Director who understands that *my* professional work may involve neglecting her in order to relate to my literary critic colleagues as fully as possible.

I want a Writing Director who will want to remain a Writing Director for the rest of her days, and who will find fulfillment in this most ennobling, if humbling, of tasks. Once I have shown her the ropes I will



expect her to handle everything; we will indeed be a team, but I will be the titular head, the silent partner. Yet if, by chance, she does not meet our department's rigorous criteria for tenure—after all, we have our standards to maintain—I want the liberty to replace the present Writing Director with another one. When I have tenure and never have to think about freshman composition again, I want a Writing Director who will remain faithfully at her post. Naturally, I will expect a fresh, new life; the Writing Director will take the program and be solely responsible for it so that I am left free.

My God, who *wouldn't* want a Writing Director.

NOTE

- \* Any resemblance to Judy Syfers's "I Want a Wife" (*Ms.*, December 1971) is decidedly intentional.

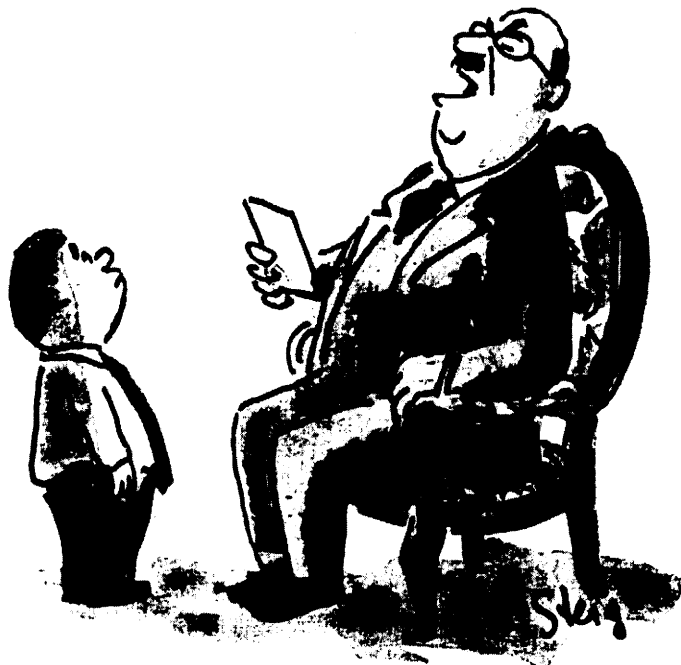
## *Why I (Used to) Hate to Give Grades*

WHEN I WAS BUT A SPRIG ON THE FAMILY TREE, GROWING UP IN THE New Hampshire college town where my father, Professor Zimmerman, taught chemistry and chemical engineering, an emblematic cartoon by William Steig appeared in *The New Yorker*. It depicted a downcast youth glancing surreptitiously at a report card held with distaste by a man in a suit looming bulbously from his armchair. The caption, “B-plus isn’t good enough for a Zimmerman”—yes, that really was the name in the cartoon—so succinctly expressed the family ethos that my parents made dozens of copies. The cartoon became their Christmas card that year. When my siblings and I were in college, “the B-plus joke,” as we had come to call it, would arrive, anonymously, at midterm and final exam times. As the grandchildren arrived they, too, were blessed with copies of their own. “The B-plus joke” has become the subject of long distance phone calls, impromptu seminars at family reunions, and considerable sardonic mirth.

That a B-plus was in fact *never* good enough for a Zimmerman, however, is my lifelong legacy. Its message will be inscribed on my grave.

Over the years I’ve filled up a depressing stack of grade books. Their limp, academic-green covers conceal a myriad of cryptic symbols, which in turn embed stories of work and goofing-off, hope and despair, brilliance and just-going-along-for-the-ride. Although I have always—well, usually—looked forward to reading papers, and can even tolerate reading exams, the calculus of giving grades had become, over time, preferable only to doing the income tax. Until last year.

It’s easy to understand why giving grades was so grim, as I explain in the first half of this essay. This half focuses on the nature and problems presented by *grading*—the letters, numbers, percents and other forms of tallies—the characters that appear in grade books, on transcripts, and in



“B-plus is not good enough for a Zimmerman!”

Drawing by W. Steig. © 1958 *The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.*

other forms of score keeping, individually and in the aggregate. When I say *grading* I mean exactly that. I am not confusing *grading* with other ways of responding to student writing—such as extensive comments, oral or written (on screen or hard copy), preferably on early or intermediate drafts.

But when the semester’s approaching end made it necessary once again to assign grades it dawned on me, for reasons that will be made clear in this paper’s second half, to put not only the burden of proof but the burden of articulating that proof on the students. Who could have a more vested interest in the outcome of grading than the very recipients themselves? The process by which this worked transformed a tension-filled monologue (myself muttering to myself) to a constructive dialogue between students and teacher—a dramatic alteration for the better. With adaptations to course level and type of class, this method has a potentially wide application.

#### WHY GRADES ARE MISLEADING

*Grades exist for an institution’s administrative convenience.* Letters, numbers, and percents can be tallied, averaged, fiddled with, and fudged to satisfy a variety of institutional purposes. Under the guise of fake precision

schools, like other advertisers, can announce, “Our students are better [or worse] than \_\_\_\_.” Fill in the blanks: *they were last year*. But what about the year before? *yours*. All of yours? in comparison with all of ours, or only selected populations—say, all pre-meds—under certain circumstances—preparing for the MCAT? *students in other school systems*. Which students? Which systems?

*Grades fit record-keeping formats*. Grades fill slots on forms. If transcripts didn’t exist, registrars would invent them or their equivalent. They’d have to—to accommodate not a rage for precision but an institutional need for shorthand, a way to code, store, and transmit information in a compact way. Grades are an efficient means of reducing complicated information to a simple code that can be interpreted with alleged unambiguity by whoever sees the symbols and knows the context—and many others who know nothing whatever about the context. Does the meaning of the A, or the B+, or the C—in practice our grading scales sink no lower except for no-shows—reside in the mind of the grader? the reader of the transcript? the student who thinks, irrespective of the actual grade, that it should have been better? Why ask—the meaning is crystal clear.

*Grades look precise*. They aren’t. As we who have tried for years to convey the nuances of a host of meanings know only too well, the process of grading attempts to put a precise label on an imprecise assessment of a host of disparate components (such as subject, substance, organization, development, style, accuracy and finesse in using sources, grammar and mechanics, ethos—and perhaps format and punctuality). To amalgamate such disparities under a single symbol is comparable to trying to make strawberry jam—pure, elegant, tangy—by combining the strawberries not only with apples and oranges, but bananas, grapes, blueberries . . . Truth in labeling requires that we call a fruit salad a fruit salad, and list the components in order of importance. What if other ingredients (broccoli, carrots—dare I say bologna?) enter the mixture, and further distort the categories?

*Grades look objective*. They aren’t. Each and every grade reflects the cultural biases, values, standards, norms, prejudices, and taboos of the time and culture (with its complex host of subcultures) in which it’s given. No teacher, no student (nor anyone else) can escape the tastes of their time—even rebels work against the current grain, in defiance of the echoes of other voices, other rooms. Although many, perhaps most, of these social constructs are present in all our reading and writing, they are seldom acknowledged, rarely articulated. But they inescapably inform our individual teaching of writing—the assignments we give, the range—however

broad or narrow—of what we expect the students to write, and how we respond to it, in commenting and in grading.

Does a given paper deserve a good grade because the revision literally incorporates every single suggestion the teacher made on the first draft? because the student—as we hear time after time after time—worked so hard on it? because the student is just learning English/returning to school after long absence/plays football/works a forty-hour week/comes from a disadvantaged background/is laboring under insurmountable obstacles? because the student is—and why not?—such a nice person?

Will a given paper be downgraded because it's late? sloppy? plagiarized? the sixtieth paper we've read on the subject in three weeks? because the author takes a stand that we find reprehensible, offensive, immoral, even criminal? Grading dresses up the art of marking papers in scientists's clothes. But the better the writers, the more they inspire in us as readers—and consequently, as commentators on the work, the passion that makes humanists of us all. As graders we can be fair, but as human beings we can never be objective.

*Grades label not only papers but their writers.* We say we're only responding to the text, not to the character of the writer behind it, but our students know better. They know from experience what it is to be labeled "An A Student." "A B Student." "A C student." Or worse. When I gave freshman Dewayne (name changed to protect the innocent) a generous B on doggerel verse he had written to honor his—yes—dog, he took umbrage, "Hero deserves more than a B. He's the best dog in Bean Blossom Township." Exactly. If the students are in graduate school, "A B+ isn't good enough for a Zimmerman" is their mantra. "Love me love my paper," they cry, and try as we may to look only at the words on the page, we cannot ignore the writer behind as well as in the text, or the stereotypes that cling to the A, the B, or the C student, clad in the velcro grade to which a host of connotations, positive and pernicious, cling.

#### WHY GRADES ARE BIG TROUBLE

*Grades are big trouble because they undermine good teaching.* Current composition theorists agree, in principle anyway, on the importance of dialogic discussions in which all students have a right to speak up and speak out, writing workshops, and revisions that incorporate the writer's resultant insights. But grades automatically signal who is more equal than all the rest put together. The teacher, who has the power and authority to award the grade, therefore has the power to impose her views on the directions the discussions and the resulting papers should go. But what if

the teacher misses the point? What if the teacher's rage for order overrides the student's need to say something important to him, prompted by an assigned reading but tangential to the teacher's conception of the writing assignment?

"Just tell me what you want," our students ask—"and I'll give it to you in order to get a good grade" is the unspoken half of that sentence. "Abandon personal investment all ye who enter here" might be their motto. For when students engage in that transaction they give up both passion and concern. In consequence, they relinquish ownership of their writing and with it commitment to their subject, engagement with its ideas and point of view, and a willingness to rewrite beyond the minimum. If the students tailor their writing to contours of the teacher's views, how can they engage in the critical thinking and tough-minded independent learning we claim to encourage? No wonder such papers are boring; the teacher has already pre-determined what they will say.

*Grades are big trouble because they inhibit, even block, student discussion and response to the course material.* In transactions between teacher and students such as those described above, only the bold, the hyperconfident, or the naive have the courage to speak for themselves instead of becoming their teachers' ventriloquists.

With most writing assignments we give, we expect the resulting papers to fall within a predictable range, however wide or narrow the latitude. Yet we've all had the experience of the paper that's out of bounds—in which the writer marches to a different beat, down a different avenue, even out of the universe established in the classroom. Once we've ruled out plagiarism—the knee-jerk reaction to aberrant papers—how do we respond to a paper when the student has ignored our careful cues? How do we respond to the fairly common paper that begins to discuss, say, the assigned literary text at hand but that incorporates (some would say *wanders to*) an examination of an issue in the writer's life inspired by something analogous in the text? Do we automatically treat the paper's altered direction as a problem in organization, and see the writing as bent out of shape? Or do we acknowledge such shifts in perspective and structure as ways the student has chosen to make the subject her own? What if the assigned literary analysis begins in the detached stance and vocabulary of a literary critic, but alters to a passionate, personal voice that reflects the change in focus?

These are not questions that can be answered in the abstract, but only with specific references to the paper at hand. If we expect our students to function as engaged, critical readers and writers, then we should encourage and accommodate writing that is full of, in Annie Dillard's words,

“unwrapped gifts” for the teacher and “free surprises” for the authors, writing that they care about. We can provide appropriate encouragement, direction, and critical queries—preferably on early and intermediate drafts—much more effectively in commentary than in grades. If students and teachers alike write early and write often, there should be no major problems of organization, development, tone in the final version of the paper—by which time a grade (if given) should be almost irrelevant.

*Grades are big trouble because they look fixed and permanent.* It’s a toss-up as to which is worse, a false appearance of permanence, or an actually unchangeable grade. One scenario occurs when the teacher, attempting to be kind as well as to encourage revision, allows the student to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite the paper in anticipation of a better grade. This procedure not only promises to inundate the teacher with revised old papers on top of the unrevised new ones that continue in response to new assignments, it also signals that grades are negotiable, temporary markers on the road that leads ultimately to A’s, if both teacher and student have sufficient stamina to stay the course. And why not?—if the teacher has provided numerous corrections at each stage, at some point she’ll be grading her own writing rather than the student’s, anyway.

If, on the other hand, the grade given initially can’t be changed, why should the student bother to revise the paper? If grades were out of the picture, the real reasons for revising—such as clarity, emphasis, argument, style—would become manifest, and the implication that writers revise essentially to improve their grades would become irrelevant. When Hemingway said he rewrote the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times, he was “just getting the words right.”

*Grades are big trouble because they’re dishonest.* Oh, not necessarily in my course, and naturally not in yours, but that nationwide grade inflation is rampant is not news. For practical purposes undergraduate grading scales in most schools have in the past two decades been reduced from five points to three—A to C, with Fs reserved for no-shows, and graduate grades reduced from three points to two (A to B).

#### A SERENDIPITOUS SOLUTION

At the beginning of the fall semester this paper, originally titled “Why I Hate to Give Grades,” stopped at this point. It dangled over the abyss of the inevitable, inexorable need of my institution—like most others—to assign grades to the work of every student in nearly every course (with the exception of the occasional pass/fail undergraduate course, and continuing credit for graduate students working on dissertations). I didn’t know how to end it.

So I took “Why I Hate to Give Grades” to the first meeting of my advanced Writing Workshop in Creative Nonfiction—fifteen juniors and seniors selected by portfolio admission. We all wore shorts (it was hot), but I was the only one professing nonchalance under a big-brimmed red straw hat instead of the *chapeau du jour*, a baseball cap on backward. For although I wanted to set the example of how the workshop would operate in reading and commenting on papers (“What works well in this paper? What could be done to make it better?”), I didn’t want these still-strangers to see my uncertain face as I read my work-in-progress.

My reading of that paper proved critical, in ways both intentional and inadvertent. I meant to signal that all of us, myself included, were colleagues in a writing community governed by clearheadedness, candor, and courtesy. I meant to affirm that good ideas were the heart of this course, and that revision was its soul. I wanted the students to acknowledge that nearly everything anyone wrote—or rewrote—could be made still better.

My reading also, of course, illustrated that it was appropriate to discuss unfinished work—a good way to raise questions and solve problems. In retrospect, I can see that the appearance of an unfinished work at the outset of the course may have also signaled that it was all right not to finish anything. Because I myself am often working on several papers concurrently, shifting from one to the other as the insight, or the research data emerges, it seemed reasonable to allow my students the same latitude. However, at some point the work must end; either deadlines descend or the writer has done all she can with a paper and has to let it go. Next time, in the interests of smoothing the roughness that exists even after several drafts, I’ll require that at least two major papers be brought to closure; the writer can always open them up later on.

Moreover, by explaining “Why I Hate to Give Grades,” I conveyed another message whose power I didn’t realize until well into the semester—that grades were incidental, that the emphasis was on the writings themselves. “I really do hate to give grades,” I told the class when I returned their warmup papers, “Why I Write,” retitled by one writer, “Why I Wrong.” “I want you to focus on making your writing better, and not to get hung up on a letter grade. I tell you what,” I said, “let me know when you’ve finished a paper to your satisfaction, and then I’ll give you its grade. However,” I was compelled to add, “throughout the semester I’ll be keeping a running record of your grades, on the originals as well as the revisions. As a fail-safe mechanism, I’ll tell you if your grade on any given version is dipping below C level.” The grungy green gradebook came to mind—but never to class.



During the semester the students had to write seven papers (some later papers could expand their predecessors), and turn in revisions on alternate weeks. All original versions, and many revisions, were discussed in class, either in small groups or by the class as a whole. I also wrote extensive commentary, usually on the initial version; the author and I each got a copy of the printout. After the second paper I virtually stopped marking the numerous errors of spelling and mechanics and the absence of titles on the papers; by then even the most cavalier students in this freewheeling group (one student's warmup was "Why I Rant") understood that house rules insisted on the absence of the former and the presence of the latter.

Preoccupation with the texts, and the rhythm of paper-and-revision, paper-and-revision obscured the fact that after ten weeks into the semester not one student had ever asked me for a grade on any paper, in class or in conference. The class response groups, like their writing, had taken on an extracurricular life of their own in which a number of the students analyzed each others' work and spurred each other on. That I didn't know about these meetings until the semester's end attests to an ideal shift of focus. For in becoming each others' audience, the students' reciprocal critiques validated their work and bypassed grading.

Amanda's group typifies the entire class, except for the two who disappeared by mid-semester, though one burly lad surfaced briefly, first with pinkeye, later with pink hair. Amanda explained, in her semester's-end commentary: "While I used to keep my writing strictly to myself, working with class peers has loosened me up a bit. Mike and Jeff have been very encouraging throughout the course of my work, exactly what I need to feel comfortable." In order to avoid feeling constrained, even "shut down by strict guidelines," Amanda decided to "find inspiration" in writing for her friends. "And it made a difference," she said, "Jeff's 'Vision Quest' paper encouraged me to write about my Mt. Washington experience. . . . He told me he stayed up all night writing his paper in its entirety. To be honest, I was jealous. And for the next week I tried to do the same thing." She continues, "I attacked my paper with such hopeful energy that I wrote more in the next few weeks" than in the rest of the semester. "I proudly showed my versions to Jeff, acting out the conversations, explaining and unfolding all of the conflicts and interactions in such a way that I explored the subject many times more deeply than I originally had thought. He has been so encouraging, and inspiring in his own writing, that my account of Washington has taken on a deeply personal significance. I see it now as a metaphor for my life experience since last summer."

“Well,” I finally said as the semester’s end lurked two weeks away. “I have to give you a semester grade, and no one has asked for a grade yet. Does this mean that your works are still in progress?” They nodded. “O.K. Then when you bring in your completed portfolio for our final conference, include a letter to me in which you identify the grade you think you deserve for the semester, and your rationale for this grade, based on your four best papers. What would the odds be that you could write four more of this quality? This letter will contain a critical analysis of your own work and you’ll write it as you would any other critical paper, considering such features as”—I distributed the criteria—“significance of topic; organization; nature and solidity of evidence; language, style, tone; creation of authorial persona and ethos; spelling, mechanics, syntax. Moreover,” I added, “explain what problems you had as a writer at the beginning of the semester, and what progress you’ve made in solving them. Also, include an estimate of your contributions to the writers’ workshop.” They nodded again. “Do you want me to bring my written assessment of your work to conference too?” I thought of the Evergreen State model. Groans and grimaces. “O.K. It’s your show.”

The students’ self-assessment, while claiming preemptive authority, would also require them to shoulder the burden of proof. I did not realize until we discussed their analyses in conference how much of the burden that removed from me. In all instances but one I agreed exactly with the students’ analyses of their performances as writers and critics. There was a single exception. Suzy, the best writer in the class, grossly undervalued work that the rest of us considered superb—taut, complex, original, and precise. For instance, her paper on anorexia begins, “I see them everywhere I go: the skinny girls with the gaunt faces and matchstick legs, an ass way too flat and underfed, and eyes that are hard with purpose. They carry their bodies forward, holding their hips out before their smile.” In conference, I told Suzy how good her work was and, flipping through her portfolio, I showed her why.

Because the other students and I agreed on the substance of their self-evaluations—content, form, style, growth over time—conferences were the easiest I had experienced in three decades of teaching, and the most expeditious. The material was all there, in the portfolios and in the interpretations. Had I disagreed with their analyses, as I did with Suzy’s, I’d have said so and explained why. That we were able to agree so consistently reaffirms the tenor of the feedback that the students had been receiving throughout the semester, in every class and on every paper.

We did not, however, always concur on grades. On the whole, my grades were about a half-step lower than the students’, because of differences in

emphasis. But because our points of agreement were so numerous, it was also easy to tell the students in person why (in most cases) they'd be getting some form of B instead of the A they desired, but didn't necessarily expect. Thus when Cory wrote, "I want an A and I'll understand a B+," it was easy for me to counter with a B and to explain why. Jeff, a student risen from the ashes of his dropout self, his literary aspirations not only rekindled but inspiring Amanda's work, affirmed, "I'm very happy to tell you that I aced this class and confirmed that I am a good writer, good enough to even continue onto graduate school and maybe one day to earn my keep through my writing. I deserve an A+ for this course." "Not quite," I said, "Your writing is tougher and much better; it still needs work"—again the portfolio showed why—"but keep at it."

In conference I could readily acknowledge the students' eagerness for a grade that accommodated their perceived growth, including their newfound willingness to take risks in writing about subjects that came to mean a great deal to them ("true heartfelt renditions of a young girl's feelings and emotions"), to experiment with structure and style, and to revise and revise and revise again. In the same conference, when we perused their portfolios together, the students could acknowledge that even though they'd come a long way their writing still had miles to go before they could match the authority and grace of texts like Suzy's. The sole student who suggested an A based on punctiliousness, punctuation, and perfect attendance conceded that depth and development were overriding virtues. In a point of tact but also of truth, we all agreed that with the students' momentum and morale on their current high, if the course could have lasted for another semester, or even eight more weeks . . . As I filled out the grade sheets in a half-hour instead of my usual day of agonized indecisiveness, I realized that the semester-long communication culminated in grades that were perceived as just and (except for the underconfident Suzy) surprised no one.

#### BUT WOULD THIS WORK WIDELY?

At my back I can hear the skeptics scoff. OK, so you could avoid giving grades in that class because they were advanced students in a merit-based elective; the students were highly motivated, working in a community of writers who received continuous feedback on their work, in and out of class. But I'm teaching a subject-matter course \_\_\_\_\_ [fill in the blank]; if I had to spend as much time on writing as you did we'd never get anything else done. And what about freshmen—or grad students—who require continuous grades to reassure them that they're not flunking out?

What about large lecture courses where to comment so extensively on papers would cause instant teacher meltdown? (I personally will have more answers after I've experimented with this scheme in other, very different types of courses.)

But teachers working with Writing-Across-the-Curriculum programs have already devised solutions that address most of these matters, and more—ways to assign lots of writing and to manage the paper load through a combination of peer feedback, selective teacher commentary, TA support in large lecture courses, and shifting more responsibility onto the students themselves. If each and every writing assignment incorporates not only the key language of its subject, but of its disciplinary-based form, structure, and style, students will understand what the teacher wants and will have the language both to write in and to discuss their work. Whether or not students have received grades throughout the semester, on papers and on tests—where it would probably be much more confusing to eschew grades than to assign them—there's no reason they can't be asked to submit a semester's end progress report. Again, this could be discipline-specific, and (if desired) it could be designed to accompany a portfolio of the semester's work. At minimum, it would comprise a critique of the student's work, and rationale for the semester grade as the basis for discussion with the professor (in small classes) or teaching assistants (in larger classes). The instructor could specify in advance that the conference is to be a colloquy, not a last-ditch attempt to lobby for a better grade. If needed, the conference could be abbreviated, or conducted through e-mail commentary on the student's self-critique, though, like Socrates, I think there is considerable virtue in person-to-person dialogue.

Yes, this solution places a great deal of trust in the students. The instructor trusts that they'll understand what the course is about, what they're supposed to have learned and done in it, and what level of proficiency they've attained relative to where they began, their peers, and college standards. This means that teachers have to be clear about course aims and assignments, consistent in responding (or in training assistants to respond) to student work, and to student self-assessments. Fortunately, we are truly blessed to teach in an educational system where the teachers are strong, the papers are good looking, and all the students are above average. So it shouldn't be hard.

## *Initiation Rites, Initiation Rights*

with Thomas E. Recchio

LAST FALL, AS NEWCOMERS TO THE UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT OURSELVES, we taught the indoctrination course to some twenty beginning TAs. Many were new to graduate work, most were new to the university, all were new to teaching, and nearly all were unfamiliar with the rhetorical theory on which we were basing the course. Tom, the new Writing Director, had taught English in American and Japanese universities for some fifteen years. Lynn, first holder of the newly endowed Aetna Chair of Writing, had taught twice that time in colleges and universities north and south, east, midwest, and west. Despite our considerable experience, we soon came to realize that we, like our new TAs, were strangers in a somewhat strange land. Although its contours looked like familiar *terra firma*, this new land proved to contain more potholes, sinks, and depressions than met the innocent eye.

The natives were friendly, even genial, with a single conspicuous exception. After all, they had invited us to join them and had already made Lynn a permanent member of the tribe. However, their mores and customs were in some ways curious and unfamiliar. The price of survival was, perhaps, to learn these well and rapidly and to blend in as if we'd always lived there. But because we arrived given not only a mandate for change but also the opportunity both to invent our jobs and transform the writing curriculum, up, down, and across, we did not expect simply to adapt to our new milieu. We wanted our presence to be felt. So although we were polite and said we hoped our new colleagues would approve of the changes we were suggesting, we actually hoped to effect utter transformation. However, as newcomers in an already established culture, our real status, as anthropologist Victor Turner would say, was liminal. We were neophytes, our place as fully functioning members of the dominant culture was unclear. Our new jobs, like any others, were to be accompanied by initiation rites. Thus we had no choice but to participate in these rites, formal and informal, and all of them inevitable.

Although we knew we could not avoid these rites, we have come to see our participation less as the performing of ritual gestures that signal our willingness to conform and to play by a set of inviolable rules, and more as an engagement in a dynamic process. Initiation rites, Turner implies, open up spaces that enable the initiates to shape the culture even as the culture shapes the initiates. Ritual gestures acquire the performers' styles and, as a result, the rites and the culture which sanctions them are both changed in a complementary process. Thus the vitality of the culture is ensured. Notwithstanding the folk wisdom that says "it is easier to move a graveyard than to change a curriculum," universities, departments, curricula are of necessity susceptible to change, for change is indeed the price of survival, both institutional and individual. Thus initiation rites can become initiation rights.

Though their manifestations may be diverse, these rites have predictable characteristics common to all the colleges and universities we're familiar with. In the immortal words of Ann Landers, "We've been there, Honey, often enough to know." For the information of job-seeking WPAs everywhere, the refreshment of the newly initiated, and the postgraduate education of those so long on the job they have forgotten what it was like to be new, we identify these rites here. An *explication de texte* will be followed by some suggestions for how to deal with them—in some instances through re-active behavior that accommodates the rites; in other instances through taking the initiative that transforms initiation rites into initiation rights.

#### THE RITES<sup>1</sup>

*Rite One.* Something important that you've been promised will not be ready when you arrive new on the job, like an office, a computer, a salary check. You may not even be on the payroll.

Corollary: It will gradually become clear that a promise made when you were hired (even, alas, in writing) will not be kept, such as a reduced course load or the services of an assistant.

*Rite Two.* Whatever you anticipated your duties to be, they will be expanded. If you cheerfully accept this increase (an extra uncovered class, running the writing center along with the writing program, monitoring WAC, and/or supervising the summer Writing Project), more will be added. And more.

Corollary: If you grudgingly accept this increase, you'll still have to do the work—but your lack of alacrity will be noted at tenure time even though "service" may not "count."

*Rite Three.* The funding you anticipate for a major program will be curtailed drastically or wiped out entirely. You will be expected to deliver the goods anyway.

*Rite Four.* Someone will let slip a denigration of your job, your discipline. Writing Director. Writing. Freshman English. They will make it clear to you that you are—unlike medievalists, Renaissance men (yes), Victorians, Americanists, modernists, theorists—a second-class citizen. Writing instruction is a service; therefore, you're a servant, not the real thing. After all, writing is easier than thinking; when the going gets tough, the tough-minded become critics, not WPAs.

Corollary: Somebody will be gratuitously nasty to you. They will demean and insult you. They will do it anonymously. The well-intentioned will tell you, perhaps even to your face, that they really like your work—even if it *is* in writing.

*Rite Five.* Somebody “out there”—a corporate donor, a captain of industry, a state legislator, a trustee—will call your department chair and complain that the students from your program “don't spell so well” and “they don't write too good either” and “it's all your fault.” Just because this happens within the first month you're on the job doesn't mean it won't happen again. And again. Every time it does, bad PR will result.

*Rite Six.* Some of your diverse constituency will try to enlist you in the lost cause of a minority faction, say disgruntled adjuncts. Maybe you're sympathetic to it. Maybe not. You will have to decide, perhaps on the basis of very little or limited evidence—and no sense at all of the politics, where you will place your allegiance and how much effort you're willing to spend to keep your lounge chair on the deck of the Titanic.

*Rite Seven.* Whatever you were told you needed to do to get tenure will be changed: the date for review, the expectations (better finish your book on James), the weight given to external reviews, whatever.

Corollary: Work that looks respectable at some other colleges and universities won't “count” where you are: publishing textbooks, co-authoring articles (“Who *really* wrote it?”), editing books or compiling bibliographies, making instructional videotapes, conducting workshops, training tutors, mentoring TAs. . . .<sup>2</sup>

*Rite Eight.* Your new writing program agenda will become the surprising subject of department meetings. Though such meetings may have been sparsely attended in the past, this new agenda will suddenly attract phalanxes of ghosts of faculty past, and passing, and to come, rattling chains

forged of sins of previous writing directors as dire warnings. You, you may assume, are guilty—if not now, you soon will be.

*Rite Nine.* Somebody—perhaps a department chair, dean, or curriculum committee—will want you, as a WPA, to fulfill their impossible dreams, to accomplish what they've been thinking about for the past ten or twenty years but never got around to acting on. Such as setting up a writing center. Or a WAC program. Or an entrance-exit testing screening. And make sure it reflects what they don't compromise on. They have high standards, and it's your job to uphold them.

*Rite Ten.* Somebody, maybe lots of people, will want what you have. Salary. Space. Reduced teaching load. Secretarial support. The opportunity to mentor disciples in the discipline. As Judy Syfers says in "I Want a Wife," "My God, who *wouldn't* want a wife?" Or space. Or. . . .

Corollary: Or people will want you to start where they did twenty years ago and "earn"—perhaps in twenty years—your right to your current salary and amenities.

#### RESPONSES, RITUAL, AND REINTERPRETATION

These rites can be divided roughly into two categories, though there is some overlap. Some rites (one, three, four, five, and ten) represent either bureaucratic glitches (Rite One—What, no paycheck? No kidding! That's never happened to anyone before!) or an unambiguous assertion of power by the entrenched natives to maintain control over status, space, resources, curriculum. By virtue of their longevity and rank they expect us, as newcomers, to acquiesce automatically to our own marginalization or a diminution of our authority. Although as initiates we may regard this as the product of naive or wishful thinking, we will nonetheless have to respond or react to these claims, or we won't be able to do our jobs well. We cannot afford to be shut out of the territory, even though our arrival may signal that the land rush is on.

Take Rite Four, for instance. Literature faculty who complain about student writing and in the process denigrate writing teachers may be more frustrated than ferocious, wanting their students to write far better than they actually do. We've encountered such students ourselves, mild versions if not replicas, perhaps, of the students whose basic writing so troubled Mina Shaughnessy. (Could we have been so crass as to blame high school teachers for the failure of these students to write well?)

Because some of our colleagues may not know either how to elicit good writing or respond to writing that's off the mark (except to fail it), instead



of becoming knee-jerk combatants at the apparent slurs, we can try to treat their complaints as invitations for dialogue. Isn't it true that to teach literature is indeed to teach writing? After all, we evaluate our students' understanding of texts, literary and otherwise, according to their ability to write critically about those texts. But what does it mean to write critically? What sort of orientation toward texts does a critical response involve? What kinds of knowledge can students gain from writing critically? How can that knowledge be validated? In what ways is writing instrumental in learning?

These questions, the questions that "writing specialists" ask, are questions appropriate for any teachers to ask in courses involving critical thinking and writing. We don't need to passively permit ourselves and our roles to be defined by denigration. We can't allow ourselves to become the departmental scapegoats—especially for sins we didn't commit. Instead, we can take the initiative and try to transform doubts and criticisms into constructive dialogue—even if they weren't initially meant that way. That our institution hired a new WPA implies, after all, that the department recognized the need for the services and expertise that a WPA can provide. And we weren't recruited by mass mailing; they invited us, chose us, perhaps over hordes of applicants, to join them. So what may at first appear as an unambiguous assertion of power or peevishness or perversity may in fact be an acknowledgment of need. When we engage in dialogue, however, heated, that addresses that need, we're creating a climate for change.

Although the other rites (two, six, seven, eight, nine) may appear on the surface as additional re-assertions of the status quo, in fact these too contain covert invitations for constructive change, for a further transformation of rites into rights. Rite Nine, for example, brings a latent concern for writing out into the open, however circuitous the route. When this surfaces it provides the opportunity not only for constructive dialogue but for collective action. Again we as WPAs can take the initiative. When the question is raised, "What can *you*, the WPA, do about inadequate preparation or about making sure everyone can write?," we can change the implied burden to a shared responsibility for its solution. "Here's the problem. Our students can't read with understanding. Or write critically. What can *we*, the faculty, do to solve it?" Then we can bring our particular expertise to bear in working collaboratively first, toward a shared—and perhaps new—understanding of the problem, clarifying or reinterpreting the issues. Ultimately we can work together toward a resolution.

As with most discussions of the processes of transformation and change (revolutionary documents, after all, range from Marx's *Communist*

*Manifesto to Spock's Baby and Child Care*), this sounds simpler and easier than it may actually turn out to be. But we are all teachers, and teaching is, by its very nature, a transformative activity for both mind and soul. As WPAs, our teaching role is multifaceted. We are in the unique and privileged (yes!) position to challenge our students, our colleagues, other administrators, even ourselves, as we struggle to move our marginal selves to the mainstream. As we become full participants in an institutional culture, we change that culture through the very process of finding our place within it. In defining, redefining, transforming that community, we transform the ritual process from rites to rights.

#### NOTES

1. These rites are representative of the profession at large and are not particularly derived from practices unique to our home institution. Indeed, the University of Connecticut is one of the more benign institutions we've encountered, and we are happy to be here.
2. This is where statements of professional principles and competence—such as the CCCC “Statement of Principles and Standards,” the WPA consultant-evaluators' reports following campus visits, and letters from established WPAs at tenure time—can often make considerable difference. Such documents help to interpret and legitimate the WPA's professional activities for an audience up the administrative line; we have proof that such interpretations have helped convince tenure review committees, deans, and other evaluators that these activities do and should “count.” If WPAs are hired to perform duties such as those identified here, then they should be evaluated on how well they've done what they've been hired to do. Whether or not such duties should be performed at all is an appropriate subject for a job description, not for a tenure review.

## *Making a Difference: Writing Program Administration as a Creative Process*

A CLASSIC STEINBERG CARTOON SHOWS A SMALL GIRL SPEAKING IN Arabesques of fanciful, gloriously colored butterflies, to which a grey father-figure responds with slashes of dark straight lines. This visual dialogue emblematically depicts the difference between creative and literal approaches to, among other things, life, liberty, and the pursuit of writing program administration.

For administration of writing programs, as of any other complicated system, represents a balance between the straight lines and the butterflies—bureaucracy and creativity, the preordained, the pragmatic, and the precedent-setting. Some aspects of administration are boring—endless forms to fill out, memos to circulate, meetings to call, details to follow up on and follow up on and follow up on. Other aspects are downright unpleasant, dealing with malcontents, malevolence, and—because WPAs are among the chronically fiscally challenged—budgets and the priorities and hard choices these impose. Together these constitute program administration's dark straight slashes, necessary but not fun. The administrator needs always to envision the butterflies beneath and beyond these confining boundaries if writing program administration is to make a significant difference to the people and programs it affects.

Consequently, this essay will concentrate on the butterflies, the creative potential of writing program administration, which can transform a routine endeavor into a creative enterprise with enormous benefits for students, faculty, institutions—even the entire profession. I will focus on four areas of

writing program administration in which I have firsthand experience that a WPA's efforts, individually and collaboratively, can make a particular difference, and in a relatively short time: training teachers, influencing graduate education, influencing undergraduate education, and establishing or enhancing the institution's reputation in writing. Creativity, it should be noted, is a relative term; what is innovative on one's home ground may be well-established (or even passé) in other settings. Yet no one person can or should work in isolation; to make a difference in the long term, the WPA must initiate, encourage, and reinforce collegial endeavor within not only one's home department and university, but throughout the profession.

I am drawing here on my varied administrative experience as Freshman English director (University of New Mexico), Writing Director (College of William and Mary), English department chair (Virginia Commonwealth University), and currently, endowed chair of writing (University of Connecticut), as well as vice-president and president of Writing Program Administrators. The contexts of my work have probably been fairly typical for WPAs trained in literature or literature/language/rhetoric programs, for everyplace I've taught has hired me, as a specialist in both writing and literature, to bridge that gap and to infuse professional knowledge of writing into a fairly conventional, traditional literary curriculum. One other personal note: a wise administrator once told me that he thought five years was long enough for most administrative positions. "It takes a year to learn the new job," he said, "two years to invent changes, and two more years to get them into place. After that you get wedded to the status quo and are much less willing to shake things up." Except for my current position, which is infinitely varied by day, week, and month, my own experience has proven him right. I offer this philosophy well aware that a number of career WPAs are brilliant, innovative exceptions to this rule; they are not only among my best friends, but the profession's.

#### TRAINING TEACHERS

A writing director can and should take charge of training those who teach in the writing program. In every place where this has been my responsibility it has meant making a major difference in changing the departmental expectations, and hence the institution's, of what a writing program is and what it can be expected to do. If the department's practice has been to dragoon a literary specialist into serving as writing director for a limited period of indenture, it is not surprising that the job would be treated as, at best, routine paper-pushing, student-sorting, teacher-assigning; at worst, the site of the scenarios from hell sketched with dramatic economy by

Anson and colleagues. With more people trained in composition and rhetoric now taking WPA jobs, either alternative may become as rare as a Model T Ford. Here's why.

A knowledgeable WPA can make a significant change in the tradition of amateurism in teaching writing that has prevailed in English departments ever since the Harvard Committees of the 1890s "shaped the nature of composition studies" by concentrating on "the most obvious mechanical features of writing" which it was assumed that anyone could teach without specialized training (Gere, "Long Revolution"). Put simply, to teach writing in ways that draw on current research and pedagogical theory requires teachers themselves to have a passing familiarity with the following:

- rhetorical theory and history, classical through contemporary
- literary theory, including deconstruction, post-structuralism, feminism, Marxism, reader-response, postmodernism—and various subsets of each
- characteristic research methods in composition studies, ranging from criticism to case studies, "classical" experimental models, teacher-research, and assessment models (from holistic scoring to portfolio evaluation)
- the genres of creative nonfiction
- other disciplines, their assumptions, perspectives, and characteristic research methodologies, including stylistics, criticism, linguistics, philosophy, ethnography, computer science, and pedagogy.

By "familiarity" I mean not just a casual flirtation with a few "names," but sufficient acquaintance to be able to read with comprehension and comfort the major journals and other publications in the field. The section titles of the newest publication on my desk, *Composition Theory for the Postmodern Classroom*, Olson and Dobrin's compilation of articles from the past decade of *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*, illustrate this point: "The Process of Writing," "Theory and the Teaching of Writing," "The Essay and Composition Theory," "Gender, Culture, and Radical Pedagogy," and "Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Discourse." "Gender, Culture, and Radical Pedagogy" includes such chapters as "Sexism in Academic Styles of Learning," "Paolo Freire and the Politics of Postcolonialism," "The Dialectic Suppression of Feminist Thought in Radical Pedagogy," and "Peer Response in the Multicultural Classroom." Pedagogy still modeled on handbook rules and the glories of the five paragraph theme will simply not prepare students to function in this postmodern universe of discourse.

If the teachers of composition ground what they do on a basis of theoretical and research knowledge, can the rest of the faculty be far behind? A cutting-edge contingent of composition teachers over time can and does make a major impact on even the most traditional of English departments.

In a rational world, at least, their colleagues would have to cease regarding the teaching of writing with indifference or contempt and began regarding it as a respectable and appropriate professional endeavor—particularly if the composition faculty engages in the common scholarly activities of their peers, such as research, publication, and presentations at professional meetings. The presence of this critical mass of composition faculty in turn affects the outlook and morale of the entire faculty, for whether or not a given individual teaches composition, he or she is working in a climate that respects that teaching.

Some signals of this change of climate for composition are clear:

- hiring a specialist in composition and rhetoric as the Writing Program Administrator, who in turn hires, trains, and monitors a knowledgeable staff
- awarding that person tenure—which means validating the WPA's scholarly research, and validating as well the WPA's administrative efforts—not only as “service,” but as aspects of teaching and of research (see Boyer, Gere, Cambridge)
- hiring more than one specialist in composition and rhetoric to diversify curricular offerings as well as teacher training, reasoning that such faculty are no more identical than are specialists in literature and that a single generalist shouldn't be expected to do it all (cf Trimbur, “Writing Instruction”)
- involving other regular full-time faculty either in teaching composition in the English department or across the curriculum, or training those who do, or both

The latter point is especially important; a WPA can't and shouldn't be expected to be the only full-time faculty member with responsibility for the way the institution teaches composition. Other faculty must be involved. The WPA can initiate or sustain a mentoring system for new composition teachers, and can make sure that colleagues participate in the mentoring process itself. Likewise, the WPA can promote awards honoring the efforts of composition teachers, and can engage faculty in determining both the criteria and the awards. The WPA can also organize faculty discussion of grading criteria, problem papers, writing curriculum and course content, and research articles on teaching writing. The dialogue that ensues in such meetings educates everyone who attends. Efforts such as these also enhance the university's demonstration of concern for undergraduate teaching, an area of neglect in many contemporary multiversities.

#### INFLUENCING GRADUATE EDUCATION

Graduate education in composition and rhetoric can encompass much more than the training of TAs, even in a small program with limited resources. The WPA can often make a major difference in graduate education, through

introducing rhetorical theory and composition research into the graduate curriculum and preliminary exam system. Beyond the requisite composition/rhetoric/writing pedagogy course for new TAs, which in itself can be quite varied, there are a host of possibilities that can accommodate a wide range of scholarly interests:

- composition and/or rhetorical theory
- history—of an aspect of rhetoric or composition
- stylistics
- pedagogy (theory, history, practice, administration)
- genre studies (including analyzing writing in other disciplines—the sciences, law, business; or textbooks)
- writing various forms of creative nonfiction, or autobiography
- empirical research
- testing and measurement
- basic or developmental writing
- ESL
- connections between reading and writing
- linguistics
- philosophy
- writing across the disciplines (or in a particular discipline)
- social constructivism; political activism

How extensively any of the areas identified above or in the previous section can be covered, and how often, depends not only on faculty resources within a given department, but on collaboration throughout the university, among individual faculty and departments. Given the fact that few campuses employ more than one or two WPAs/composition specialists, the course offerings and research possibilities of a given school can be greatly expanded through cooperation among area institutions—of higher learning, or secondary and college, or of universities with community centers and other outreach services (see Gere, “Long Revolution”; Flower, “Literate Action”; Heath, “Work, Class”). For example, the four land-grant New England universities granting doctorates in English (Connecticut, Massachusetts—Amherst, New Hampshire, Rhode Island) collaborate to make it possible for students enrolled in one institution to take courses at the others which are unavailable on their own campuses.

The presence of faculty with expertise in composition and rhetoric makes it possible for students to present work at professional meetings, publish articles, and write dissertations either in these areas, or in areas that combine rhetorical and literary studies. In addition to presentations at CCCC, NCTE, MLA, and specialized conferences on computer pedagogy

and peer tutoring, student dissertation research in my own department, for example, has included the following: a theoretical analysis of “the hermeneutic and dialogic nature of rhetoric”; an exploration of “voice” in personal essays; creative nonfiction family history; historical biographical fiction; rhetorical studies of Thoreau’s metaphorical use of geography, and of Hawthorne’s sketches, prefaces, and essays; and an analysis of the rhetoric of physical disability in contemporary nonfiction. Interdisciplinary projects include a music thesis analyzing Renaissance music according to the form and terminology of Aristotelean rhetoric, and an English/Education dissertation on *Coaching and Judging: The Writing Teacher’s Dilemma*.

An expanded scope of graduate course and research embeds the potential benefits of broader graduate admissions criteria (to include people wanting to work in the “new” areas) and increased opportunities for graduate students to attend and present papers at professional meetings related to composition studies. The two greatest benefits are interrelated: a rise in the level of knowledgeable discussion of teaching writing, formal and informal, is paralleled by the graduates’ own prospects for postgraduate employment. Gone are the days when seat-of-the-pants classroom experience was a sufficient credential for teaching writing. Without some sophistication in rhetoric and composition, most Ph.D.s in English simply aren’t competitive for those jobs with either primary or secondary emphasis on teaching writing which have comprised fifty to seventy-five percent of the MLA job listings in recent years.

#### INFLUENCING UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

All colleges, all curricula, all courses have a pervasive complex of agendas—not only pedagogical, but social, political, institutional. Some are overt, others are so implicit or covert that teachers rarely think of them, let alone tell their students. Budgets are allocated; courses, testing programs, and writing centers are designed and staffed; textbooks are chosen and writing assignments are made to reinforce these agendas, implicit or explicit. WPAs need to understand what these agendas are, and to imagine how the multiple and perhaps conflicting perspectives of a diverse clientele will regard them. For not only is composition taught to enable students to write in particular ways at particular levels of proficiency, it is taught to serve the sponsoring institution, and in turn, the sponsors, which may be private organizations or taxpayers and boards of education. Thus individual WPAs may conceive of the curriculum as a negotiated space among varied and competing constituencies, with themselves as chief negotiators.



What do we want students to know and be able to do at what stage of their academic careers? In what ways do we want them to learn and how do we want that learning to be reinforced? The WPA can be enormously influential in determining what is taught and how, both within the English department and across the university or university system, either through writing majors or minors or a WAC program, or both. An up-to-date WPA can ensure a state-of-the-art curriculum.

Although, contrary to popular perception, writing programs do not necessarily begin nor end with freshman composition, the WPA may need to remind administrators, who fund campus writing programs, and curriculum committees who design them, of the potential breadth and depth of a composition program and its constituent courses. Memos, meetings, and collaborative grant proposals all play a part in this generic consciousness raising. Because courses and programs are so thoroughly embedded in their own institutional contexts, I will not discuss specific curricula here, but will focus on creative ways to conceive of composition courses, basic writing through advanced composition.

The following agendas that have particular influence on students may be seen as forms of *socialization*, *initiation*, and *indoctrination*. Introductory writing courses in particular *socialize* new students into their new college by making them aware of their community of peers (as in peer response and peer editing groups); by showing them how to use and manage resources (such as computers and libraries as sources of holdings and of information retrieval) and time (by establishing study and writing schedules); and—usually—by insisting on writing that reproduces the surface features that society regards as the marks of an educated writer—conventional spelling, grammar, and mechanics (see chapter three).

Introductory or more advanced, disciplinary-based writing courses also *initiate* students into the language and values of one or more specific discourse communities—of the local student and college community, and as writers and potential workers in a particular field and in a particular format (see Cambridge). Advanced composition courses initiate their students into the profession of writing, as well. Initiation also implies *indoctrination* in the college's prevailing values and beliefs (such as the desirability of political correctness) and those of the discipline on which the course focuses (such as the virtues of collaborative writing, or networked computers, or critical—read argumentative—thinking) (cf Trimbur "Writing Instruction"; Spellmeyer). More specific aspects of indoctrination in particular disciplines include *intellectual content*—what's classic, what's passé, and what's hot in a particular field; and *aesthetic* (or

*political*) sensitivity to the culture's prevailing standards—what books should students read? avoid? what films should they like? dislike? Under what conditions should the students' style be short or sweet or stuffy?

#### ESTABLISHING OR ENHANCING THE INSTITUTION'S REPUTATION IN COMPOSITION AND RHETORIC

Professionally visible WPAs can enhance their institution's reputation and public commitment to composition studies through the customary faculty avenues of research, participation in professional meetings, competition for grants and other funding, and encouragement of publication by faculty colleagues, graduate students—and sometimes undergraduates, as well. Recently, writing program administrators have begun to study various aspects of writing program administration—a sure sign that the profession has come of age. Research grants awarded by the Council of Writing Program Administrators in 1993 and 1994 include Wendy Bishop and Gay Lynn Crossley's ethnography of "the intellectual formation and development of WPAs within English departments"; Sheryl Fontaine's study of "how different models of administration affect the training of graduate TAs and their initiation as apprentice WPAs"; Barbara Walvoord's analysis of the impact of "departmental pressures on faculty [seeking change] after attending Writing-Across-the-Curriculum workshops"; Nedra Reynolds's examination of "how teachers are constructed through the discourses of instructors' manuals and instructors' versions of college writing textbooks"; a survey by Julia Ferganchick-Neufang, Joan Jung, and Tilly Warnock of "gender-based problems of women writing teachers and administrators"; Pat Belanoff's survey of how recent Ph.D.s in literature "make career choices" to teach writing and concentrate professionally on composition; William Smith and Richard Bullock's "national survey of first-year writing programs"; and a study of "external validation of portfolio assessment" by Michael Allen, Jeff Sommers, and Kathleen Yancey (Bizzell, letter).

As this range of these projects indicates, research has the potential in both theory and application for pinpointing administrative and instructional needs, problems, and solutions. Articulating these can enable institutions and administrators (including WPAs) to set priorities for funding, and for implementing programs and staff. The knowledge gained from research can improve the WPAs' ability to do good work, in administration, textbook selection, teacher instruction, and assessment, among other areas. Such research efforts and programmatic improvements—disseminated through professional meetings and publications as well as through the

institution's public relations media—enhance the reputation of both the program and the institution.

Professionally active WPAs can also make a difference in the field through leadership in national professional organizations, participation in national or regional seminars and workshops, and establishment of relations, formal and informal, with other universities and community enterprises. WPAs, organization mavens all, even love to organize each other; areas where they congregate are populated with state and regional WPA conferences (in addition to the national annual WPA Workshop and Conference); and a host of meetings devoted to composition, rhetoric, and teaching writing, such as the conferences at Penn State, Wyoming, San Diego, and the University of New Hampshire.

Yet no WPA can do it all, or do it all alone. Butterflies are not free from constraints. For creativity to flourish, WPAs need the time and energy to focus on research and ideas for imaginative teaching, rather than on being chronically bogged down in the energy-depleting intricacies of administrative minutiae, such as the Byzantine nuances of scheduling, or figuring out whether the locks on the adjuncts' office doors will work. That way be monsters! WPAs can help to ensure the survival of their creativity by reinforcing the importance of writing in their institutions' priorities—an activity that in itself may require considerable creativity. High priority for writing programs translates into continuous, guaranteed year-round funding for personnel (including year-round administrative and secretarial assistance), space, equipment, and supplies. This level of support should do much to avoid the traumas of last-minute hiring and curricular change, and the climate that transforms otherwise creative people into drudges-of-all-work (see chapter sixteen; Holbrook).

Creative WPAs might be called, in T.E. Lawrence's terms, "the dreamers of the day," "dangerous people, for they may act their dream with open eyes to make it possible." It is appropriate, realistic, and necessary to conceive of writing program administrators as initiators of change, rather than merely as reactors to the dark straight slashes of either the status quo or retrogression. The creative, soaring butterfly aspects of writing program administration are expressed through the dynamic, inextricably interwoven activities of training teachers, influencing graduate and undergraduate education, and contributing to the research and other ongoing dialogue of the profession—in the university, the community, the world.

## *Bloom's Laws*

LONG AGO AND FAR AWAY, IN A MOMENT OF WEAKNESS (I WAS ACTUALLY close to meltdown and didn't know it) I accepted a new administrative post. Some have greatness thrust upon them, I thought in my delirium, and this was a rare opportunity. So I decided, as any self-respecting (read desperate) academic would, to prepare for this status nouveau by reading up on how to do it. Book after book, article after article on administration passed under my keen eye, written by the reputable and the revered—efficiency experts; analysts of academic politics and procedures; department chairs who had been there, done that and that and that. At the time, in the dark days before WPA, imagine!, writing program administrators had no public forum and no identifiable voices, so I could glean no wisdom from that corner. I confess that from this blitz reading no authors and no titles linger. In fact, only one nugget remains in memory, the metaphor that epitomizes this exalted status: “An administrator”—not the author's exact words—“is to a department as a fire hydrant is to a dog.”

Would that canines possessed opposable digits, I would write the following observations from the dog's point of view, my personal favorite, the border collie. The border collie's marginal stance embedded in its politically correct name makes it the ideal metaphorical equivalent of an administrator—a life on the boundary between institutional structure and the locus of great change, poised on the border to bring order, even structure, out of potential chaos in the combat zone. For border collies are smart, energetic, and let's face it, bossy, born to round up strays and laggards and keep them on a course predetermined by others which they have adopted as their own. But alas, I am fated to write from the human perspective that has dogged me from that day to this, as administrative duties have adhered to my various jobs, irrespective of official title, as lint to velcro. Thus I offer here Bloom's Laws, developed over the years in an attempt to interpret low

situations—crises, confrontations, conflagrations—according to principles which I wish were higher than they are.

#### LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA

1. Anything that can be administrated will be. Including many things that can't.

2. No one was born wanting to be a writing program administrator. Or a department chair. Or a dean. No one ever entered college—or even graduate school—wanting to be a writing program administrator. Where did we go wrong?

3. WPAs don't think something is fun unless it requires three hundred (not enough? five hundred? a thousand?) hours of community service.

4. The grungier and more time-consuming a job is, the more eager the WPA is to tackle it. "Let's go out to the old barn and read placement exams, organize a conference, start a journal . . ."

#### THE LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

5. Anything that looks simple isn't. A ten-minute job will take two hours. A two-hour job will take eight hours. Nothing takes ten minutes.

6. Whenever you, the administrator, are in your office, someone else will be in there with you.

7. Work is whatever goes on in your office. Therefore, when you leave at (fill in the number—5, 6, 7, 8 . . . ) p.m., you will have done a full day's work.

8. High drama at (fill in the number—5, 6, 7, 8 . . . ) p.m. is low comedy at 8 a.m.

#### THE SIGNIFYING MONKEY AND THE LANGUAGE OF SIGNIFYIN(G)

9. What isn't written down will be: a) Used against someone—maybe you. b) All screwed up. c) Soon forgotten. d) Misremembered, and reinterpreted to suit the (mis)rememberer. Therefore, write everything down.

10. Whatever gets written down will be: a) Used against someone—maybe you. b) Lost. c) Soon forgotten. d) Misfiled. Therefore, write nothing down.

11. If a meeting's agenda can disintegrate, it will. Therefore, write everything down in advance (see Laws 9, 10).

#### CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

12. Doing a study precludes—not precedes—taking action.

13. Procedure preempts principle.

14. Procedure preempts policy.
15. Procedure preempts substance.
16. Complexity kills. Substituting extraordinary procedures for ordinary ones really screws things up. Adding more administrators to fix things really fixes things.

#### PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

17. Computers are black holes for money. We can't live without them.
18. Email is a black hole for time. We can't live without it.

#### THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE DAMNED

19. People who threaten to quit if you don't appease them won't.
20. People who will leave will leave.
21. You, we may assume, are expendable.

#### CULTURE AND ANARCHY

22. A new paradigm for teaching writing is, as Sam Johnson has said of a second marriage, a triumph of hope over experience.

23. A new administrative job is, likewise, the triumph of hope over experience.

Nevertheless, we soldier on. When I succumbed to the lure of yet another administrative job I taped the insight du jour into the center drawer of my desk. "You are expendable" (Law 21) I read everytime I reached for a pen, a paper clip, or more and more often as the job—dare I say—progressed, one aspirin, and then another and another . . . .

The moment of truth came, as the truth often does, in bed—one dawn at 5 a.m., my usual time for an hour of creative drowsiness before I had to get up. This time I awoke, bolt upright. Instead of rejoicing because I had solved yesterday's problem (I had finally found offices for the adjuncts—converted music practice rooms, their soundproof quality significantly intact) I was fretting because I couldn't get doorknobs for those very rooms. In a flash I leapt out of bed, "I didn't get a research PhD to worry about doorknobs! I'm going to quit this job" (see Law 20). And so I did. My successor did just fine.

But I couldn't stay away (see Laws 4, 23). Indeed, I feel another Law coming on—"Solving one problem only leads to another problem to be solved." After all, the new millenium is coming, and with it as the night follows the day will come changes, crises, problems to be solved. Once a WPA, always a WPA, born to set things right (Laws 22, 23). I would like to come back as a border collie.

## *Free Play: A Prologue to Work in Progress*

*Two boys uncoached are tossing a poem together,  
Overhand, underhand, backhand, sleight of hand, every hand,  
Teasing with attitudes, latitudes, interludes, altitudes*

...

*And now, like a posy, a pretty one plump in his hands.*

Robert Francis, from "Catch"\*

I'VE BECOME A PAIN AT PARTIES THESE DAYS. LIKE DIOGENES WITH HIS lantern in search of the bright face of honesty, I wander about, buttonholing the folks we know at these gatherings, academics and other teachers mostly, along with musicians, painters, a fiber artist, and a lot of writers. "How do you know when you've got a good idea?" I ask. "How do you know when you're being really creative?"

To a person, they recoil in shock. Am I asking them to spill trade secrets? Have I asked them to address the unspeakable? Or merely the unutterable, the ineffable? In any event, I never get an answer. They refuse to meet my eyes; they either change the subject, or escape to the bar. I have learned not to be surprised. In fact, I suspect if they were to answer they'd give the sort of fake—and contradictory—reasons hale centenarians do when pressed to explain why they've lived so long. "Eight glasses of spring water a day." "An eggnog diet—and light on the eggs." "An hour of vigorous swimming every morning." "The only exercise I get is pushing myself away from the table." And so on.

I realize that I am asking the same question for which I was seeking answers in my doctoral dissertation—how can people explain the creative processes of others? The answer I got then was "They don't." The answers I'm getting now are, "We can't"—at least, not in so many words. Yet the free play of ideas continues, in our teaching, behind and within our reading and our writing, in our—dare I say free time, "teasing with attitudes, latitudes, interludes, altitudes . . ." We recognize good ideas when they arrive—aha!—while we're feeding the baby, walking the dog, taking a

shower, or waking bolt upright from a deep sleep. Eureka! Then we can figure out how to translate these ideas into words, actions, a plan of research—perhaps many plans, with many revisions.

So I back off from this question, and as I head toward the refreshment table—is not chocolate mocha cheesecake a prime source of inspiration?—I affirm my earlier decision not to end this book with a prescription for creativity in composition studies. It is possible to transform any liberating precept into a stultifying rule; much of the bad rap that the writing process movement has been experiencing of late comes from misguided attempts to transform a free play into rule-bound work. Thus while I am paralyzed by the imperative to “Be creative!” I find that a looming deadline, as Sam Johnson observed of an impending hanging, “wonderfully focuses the mind.” Yet I, and my students, and many others can do our best work in an atmosphere that encourages free play, tossing words, ideas, metaphors, “overhand, underhand, backhand, sleight of hand, every hand,” until we get “a pretty one plump in our hands.”

So to offer a prescription for creativity in composition studies would be in the manner of the centennarians: “Rise at daybreak and think and write for three good hours before the cares of the day do you in.” “You can count on doing your best work late at night, after the rest of the world has shut down.” Or, “Have a clear plan, with well-identified stages and goals, and stick to it.” But why not follow the example of—was it Flannery O’Connor?—who said, “I just sit here at my desk every day from nine to twelve, and if the muse wants to come, she knows where to find me.” After three numbing nonstop days on a search committee for—imagine, a creative writer—the only certain advice is, “Avoid committees.”

Everybody comes to their own creativity through their own sense of possibility, and in their own ways. An open mind helps, in the Henry Jamesian sense of “Be one on whom nothing is lost,” as does an eagerness to eschew dogma, question authority, disregard dull precedents, leapfrog over protocol. And always keeping a sense of the play of metaphor, as Francis’s “Catch” observes,

Anything, everything tricky, risky, nonchalant,  
Anything under the sun to outwit the prosy.

This is as close as people in diverse fields can come to explaining how they get good ideas, recognize them, and light out for unexplored territory to work with what they get. The rest of this discussion will focus on where my own sense of free play is leading in the new millenium.



Indeed, to light out for the territory ahead is, in the American tradition, to learn by going where we have to go. In many ways, *Composition Studies as a Creative Art* is concerned with developing a sense of direction and momentum in a field whose boundaries are fluid and continuing to expand. That we don't have a single right way to teach writing or to study this vast subject is evidenced by the numerous orientations of the field of composition studies. What some may see as an invitation to chaos, I interpret as an ongoing series of opportunities for enormous creativity. Even if we make mistakes large and small, as continual learners are bound to do, we can pick up, dust off, and keep on going; the larger professional context continues to provide a matrix where we can test ideas, develop appropriate language, curricula, research designs, and administrative models to accommodate a myriad of discoveries-in-progress.

That the range of possibilities in composition studies is infinite is epitomized in the variety of job descriptions, ever more eclectic as they become more and more comprehensive. For instance, a current ad for a senior position identifies "preferred candidates" as those who "bring an interdisciplinary perspective to the teaching of writing and an ability to conceptualize composition in terms of its changing relationship to English studies, the [host] university, and American culture at large." Candidates' areas of expertise may include "scientific, technical, and professional writing; computers and composition; postmodern, feminist, and cultural studies; secondary school preparation." Candidates are expected to be established scholars and excellent teachers at undergraduate and graduate levels, able to direct "faculty/graduate research on student writing, course and program development, colloquia and workshops." "Aha," I think. "Jobs such as these," in fact most composition studies jobs, "encompass all the areas of *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*—teaching, writing, scholarship, and administration." Jobs such as these encompass not only the entire universe of discourse, they encompass the world.

As we approach the millenium, a host of topics and issues have arisen that will call forth not only creative thinking and research but imaginative public policy. A number of these, embedded in the following discussion, were raised—but scarcely resolved—in *Composition in the 21st Century: Crisis and Change*, both in the 1993 Writing Program Administration conference that Don Daiker, Ed White, and I co-organized, and in the book of conference papers of the same title that we edited. Assessment, for example, an issue even more incendiary now than it was a scant few years ago, involves complex and troubling issues of national standards, student placement, teacher qualifications, test development, bias, oversight, the

relation of teaching writing to community literacy, local, state, and national needs . . . .

That intellectual property is another highly charged subject is one of many issues related to electronic communication. In an era of rapidly changing technology, the ability to communicate globally by electronic means alters our conception of the meanings of *literacy*, and *writing*, even as it opens a Pandora's box of complicated and troubling issues, among them: "Who creates a text?" "Who can read and respond to it?" "Who owns it?" "Who controls its reception, distribution, reproduction, revision, storage, deletion or destruction?" No individual teacher or scholar, no team of researchers in composition studies can address the ramifications of all these issues, let alone supply all the answers.

If we consider the issues that have assumed particular significance at the confluence of the two millenia, old and new, it is clear that while some concerns are embedded in the moment (which these are is hard to determine until the moment is past), others appear to be perennial. Among the most enduring are: "What is composition, anyway?," "Why do we teach it?," and "How can we do it better?" Although the questions may be the same, the answers have changed dramatically even during the seven years' work represented in *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*. In many ways this book may be interpreted as a series of answers to the familiar questions asked in this paragraph.

My own research projects in process, *Coming to Life: Reading, Writing, Teaching Autobiography* and *The Essay Canon*, represent only two of a myriad of multifaceted issues that will call for creativity in the new millenium. In significant ways, both books focus on the ever-changing ways that we in composition studies help address these issues, as individuals, teachers, and as members of society. Several years ago I began to pursue ramifications of these questions in *Coming to Life*, a manuscript that has been interrupted time and again by writing the work collected in the book you are reading. *Coming to Life* focuses on the relations between living one's life, constructing and reconstructing it in diaries and autobiographies, and reading, writing, and teaching writing and literature from a humanistic and multicultural perspective. However, its primary orientation is toward autobiographical literature and criticism, with composition studies as a secondary orientation—thereby reversing the emphases of *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*.

*Coming to Life* addresses a number of fundamental questions, "What is autobiography"—a question to which theorists and autobiographers have very different answers. "What is the current autobiographical canon, and how has this canonical literature changed over time?" "How

do autobiographers construct their own lives for an audience of strangers they want to be friends?" "How can we best teach autobiography, as literature and as a way to write?" The contemporary answers to these questions are embedded in an extraordinary wealth of autobiographical literature that has given power and voice to people previously suppressed or subdued in the dominant white male culture, as explained in Chapter 5 above, "American Autobiography and the Politics of Genre." This range of works, by women and men focusing on spirituality, nature, ethnicity or region, travel, exile, growing up, marginality, illness and recovery, sexual orientation, among other topics, is extremely appropriate for both composition and literature studies. The variety of theoretical and critical approaches is represented by works by Olney, Andrews, Benstock, Fontaine and Hunter, Lauter (*Canons*), S. Smith and Watson; *Coming to Life* also translates these approaches into pedagogy.

It is even harder to write a good life than to lead one; *Coming to Life* addresses a number of the reasons why teaching personal writing is both exhilarating and particularly problematic. Student writers have an immense personal stake in their personal writing. At the very beginning of *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*, Amrita spoke for her peers when she said, "I'm willing to rewrite this paper as many times as necessary to get across the spirit of my country and my people." As this book goes to press, she is writing beyond the ending of the course and signing on for its clone next year, determined to write an essay that merits publication.

That student writing is powerful and elicits powerful reactions, from themselves, their peers, and their teachers—who are simultaneously coaches and judges—complicates the pedagogy even as it energizes the class. How indeed can teachers separate the dancer from the dance, and respond to students whose implicit message is "Love me, love my paper"? Can we, should we, encourage personal writing as a way of enabling the writer to make sense of things that don't make sense? How can teachers help students to exercise discerning critical judgment in the process of transforming life into art? How is it possible to concentrate on rendering the essence of one's experience and understanding without dissolving into the confessional mode so baldly modeled in the media (see chapters four, seven and eight above)? The topics covered in *Coming to Life* range from aesthetic issues to personal combat in the contact zone, as intimated in chapter three above. Other questions, too, are the quest not only of *Coming to Life*, but of humanistic education throughout the centuries, "What is the truth/meaning of a life?" "How do we know?" And, "How do we interpret, render our understanding?"

In “From Anonymous, Evasive Prose to Writing With Passion,” Scott Russell Sanders identifies the arguments in the field, epitomizes the philosophy of *Coming to Life*, and of *Composition Studies as a Creative Art*, as well. Sanders, a distinguished writer of personal essays (see chapter eight for a discussion of “The Inheritance of Tools,” and “Under the Influence: Paying the Price of My Father’s Booze”), defends the teaching of writing in the “first person singular” that I advocate throughout both books as a way to hear what the students themselves “think about the hard questions.” Two major objections to “this call for personal writing,” are the practical one that society needs people “skilled in impersonal writing,” who can produce “rigorous science, disciplined scholarship.” “But, as Sanders says, “even if the self is not on display, an actual, flesh-and-blood-human being still composes the sentences.” The philosophical objection to personal writing is that “the self is an illusion,” and consequently “there is no person in personal writing.” Yet however fragile the construction of the self may be, as Sanders says, “it still has a moral center.” Individual human beings “go to bat and go to jail, pay taxes . . . publish books, fall in love, give birth to children, and mourn their dead.” His conclusion identifies the moral premise underlying my—perhaps anyone’s—advocacy of first-person writing: “Unless we are willing to quit holding individuals accountable for their actions, we should hold them accountable for their words” (B 4–5).

The research questions I’ve been asking in *Coming to Life* have generated others, some addressed throughout this book, others in the process of investigation. “What personal essays do people read?” I wondered, as I was constructing curricula for ideal courses in the literature of autobiography. Part of the answer is deceptively simple. Except for essay fans, most people—some two million a year—read essays in freshman composition Readers, textbook collections of short nonfiction writing.

The other part of the answer—“What essays do students read? (a term that, like autobiography, has to be conceived broadly to accommodate the contents of these anthologies)—has spread, like the very pervasiveness of these Readers themselves, into a study of *The Contemporary Essay Canon and American College Readers, 1946–1996* (forthcoming, University of Wisconsin Press), another book in progress. This one addresses the questions: What essays have been taught in American college freshman composition courses during the past half-century? By what authors? These authors and their writings constitute “the essay canon,” the only canon in all literature determined by teachers. Why and how have these been taught? What major changes in the best-selling anthologies of readings and their embedded pedagogy have occurred during this time? What

phenomena—intellectual, political, social, and economic, in particular—have influenced these changes?

To determine the answers, I am in the process of constructing a computerized data base of the contents of the canonical anthologies (any Reader published in four or more editions during the past half-century). This consists of some 90 anthology titles in 450 individual volumes, containing approximately 30,000 printings of 8000 essays by some 5000 authors. The data base, which can be sorted by author, essay title, anthology title, date of reprinting, provides the basis for a systematic study of a half-century of American college reading. In applying canon theory to pedagogy, I am considering the political, economic, and pedagogical factors that—in addition to aesthetic and historical considerations—determine the making of a pervasive, highly influential, but previously unexamined canon.

The tables of the 120 canonical authors (from Angelou to Zinsser) and their works will be included in *The Essay Canon*, a rich lode for other researchers to mine; and, when I'm done, the canonical textbooks will be donated to the National Archives of Composition and Rhetoric at the University of New Hampshire. A fugitive genre, textbooks—even best-sellers—are hard to find; it has taken nearly three years to locate copies (mostly gleaned from writing directors around the country) and we're still engaged in the quest necessary before it will be possible to interpret the data. That the search and research of the sort I've undertaken in *The Essay Canon* would not be possible without computer information retrieval capability is axiomatic.

As the topics sketched in this Afterword indicate, composition studies is part of a world wide web of the making of meaning. We have a powerful stake in doing research in these areas, and in innumerable others whose significance awaits discovery. Every topic we encounter, strange at first, but rich and tantalizing in its implications, presents the potential for understanding, intimacy, friendliness. Fortunately, one person can't know it all, do it all, or do it all alone; composition studies, like life itself, is a collective, not an individual, endeavor. Because so much is so new, we have no choice but to be creative, in the new millenium in which every day is a new beginning.

#### NOTE

- \* Robert Francis's "Catch" from *The Orb Weaver* © 1960 by Robert Francis. Used by permission of Wesleyan University Press, University Press of New England.

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