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A Reflection on Writing

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... a Reflection on Writing

So, the editor of the *Grand Valley Review*, Dan Royer, comes into my office and says, “What would you think of re-printing a chapter of your book in the *Review*?”

“Fine,” I say.

“Really?” he says. “I didn’t think you’d want to.”

“No,” I say. “That’s fine.”

“Great,” says Dan. “Maybe you could begin with a little meta-discourse on the writing.”

“Fine,” I say.

Trouble is, I don’t have a clue what a meta-discourse is.

Oh, I’ve heard the term from my younger colleagues many times. In fact, you can’t talk 10 minutes in the coffee room about any kind of literary or writing theory without the term coming up, along with other strange sounding words like *foucault* or *hermeneutics*.

I’ve even gone to a conference and listened to a talk titled “Meta-cognition and its relationship to meta-discourse: dragging ourselves toward Cartesianism, if not Platonism.” I left confused and humbled, with a strong urge to kick a rock.

Clearly, I am out of it—on the downslope of my professorial career.

My best guess is that meta-discourse has something to do with *deconstruction*, another weird term. As I understand it, deconstructionists believe that writers really don’t know what they’re doing. A writer is just some ignorant low-life who is driven by all these undercurrents and forces, like a baby pig caught in a whirlpool, and it takes someone who knows how to pronounce *derrida* to explain what’s going on. The person (who can pronounce *derrida*) provides the meta-discourse, which is what the writer really meant to say, if he or she weren’t so stupid.

Of course, I wouldn’t be surprised if I were totally wrong about this.

Or if the next convention of the Modern Language Association took my idea as its central theme.

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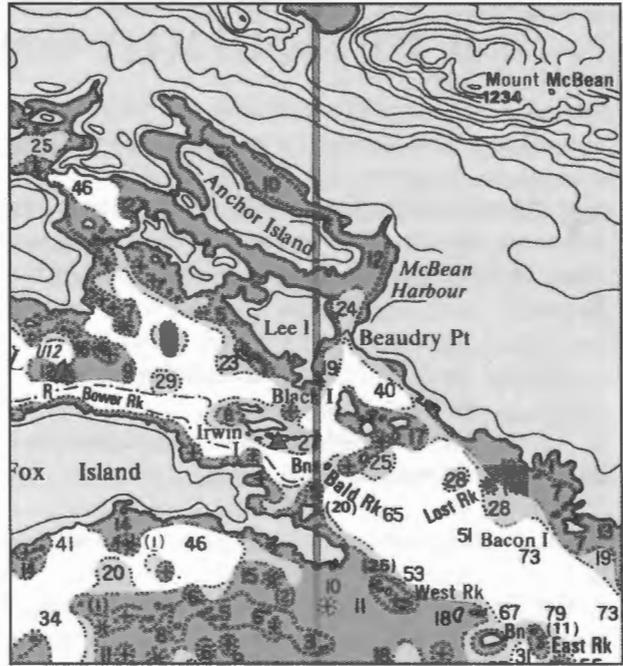
At any rate, I guess I can offer some thoughts on the section of my book that is reprinted here, as it might be relevant to *GV Review* readers.

First, I would note that it is not academic writing. In my view, this is a plus, though many of you will consider it a negative (see “deconstruction” above). (Remember the old saying, “If you can, do. If you can’t, teach. If you can’t do either one, write academic articles.”)

No, the excerpt is simply a report of my experiences, with a little reflection on some of them. How inappropriate for an academic journal like the *GV Review*! Now, if the experiences were academic, and the reflections were on the academicness of the experiences, it probably would be wholly suitable. But all that’s in this little excerpt is a brief note about Hope College (one of the few academic notes in the whole book).

I can already hear a few readers sneering, “This is about sailing! What does that have to do with anything important?”

I could perhaps mount an academic defense. But then I think back on many of the writers I love, like Mark Twain. Early in his career, he was derided as a hack journalist, for his reports on travelling to the Holy Land, for example. Then he collected those reports into the book *Innocents Abroad* which became a bestseller.



From a nautical chart of Lake Huron's North Channel. One of the joys of cruising is navigating to out-of-the-way places, finding your way by chart and compass....

And he was derided as a popular hack. He certainly had the capability of responding to such charges, but he chose not to. Instead he exaggerated the humbleness of his writing, calling them “a few notes scratched out...” or “some scribblings....” It took 50 years for him to be respectable enough to be read in school, and another 50 years before he was de-constructed.

Unfortunately, I have the right to be much more humble than Mark Twain. But I do hope there is still someone reading my book when De-construction lies a-mouldering in her grave, 100 years from now.