



Twenty Years in: An Essay in Two Parts

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Paul Heilker

Twenty Years In: An Essay in Two Parts

Part I of this essay traces the evolution of my understanding of the exploratory essay as a discursive form and a genre for teaching writing. Part II explores my motivations for advocating a polarized definition of the essay and then concludes with a call to expand the purview of composition beyond first-year courses.

I. August 2003

I am fortunate enough to be surrounded by wise people. They have taught me much about growth. They have taught me that some things are simple; some things are easy; and some things, though they are simple, are still not easy. For instance, when I once faced some personal difficulties, one of these wise people remarked, "It's really very simple—all you have to change is everything." And this is most definitely the case when we first encounter the exploratory essay (which, as everyone knows, is neither simple nor easy, either to comprehend or to compose): if you want to understand or write one of these enigmas effectively, all you have to change is everything you think you know about analytical nonfiction.

I've been studying the essay and trying to teach essayism in college writing courses for about sixteen years now, so when I began writing this, I thought

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I might be able to generalize about the process by which students come to understand the essay. But two things quickly pressed themselves upon my attention: on the one hand, as an essayist, I work within the conceit that I am every person and that my experience is universal; on the other hand, as an essayist, my inner skeptic is constantly reminding me that I am probably overgeneralizing, that my experience may be far less normative than my ego would like to admit. So rather than overreaching, let me play it safe for a while and talk about me and the evolution of *my* understanding of the essay.

The short version: In the first stage of my evolution, given its stark contrast to the strictures of the thesis-driven form I know too well, the comparative openness and flexibility of the essay allowed me to exaggerate these qualities until I came to see the essay as an antiggenre, as a place where anything goes. In the second stage, as I began to discern the characteristics of essayistic writing, I reified exploratory and expository discourse as polarized, antipathetic, and mutually exclusive entities. In the third stage, I became troubled when the professional essays I read didn't adhere to this bifurcated scheme; they were neither pure essay nor pure article but, rather, hybrids demonstrating aspects of both forms. In the "final" stage, then, I learned to see "the essay" and "the article" as abstract ideals marking out the far ends of a continuum of possibilities for analytical nonfiction, learned to locate the real nonfiction I read and write as it (almost always) falls between these extremes.

And now the longer version . . .

Stage One: Anything Goes

When I first met the essay, it seemed a wide-open space, an embodiment and enactment of untrammelled discursive freedom. "Freedom is the essay's essential mood and quality," I was told (Good 11). Since "freedom of the open spaces is the condition of the essay" (Hardwick xiv), the "liberty of the essay" (Chesteron 3) allows a writer to "take off in almost any direction" (Geertz 6). Similarly, I read that the essay "is a vagabond and free spirit" (Rhys ix), "the record of a mind apparently roaming freely [. . .] in a free association of ideas" (Pebworth 18). It is an "open form [. . .] unbound by anything but the writer's personality and the sound of his own voice" (Kazin "Introduction" x-xi), a form that "expresses the individual's wholly undetermined and freely discovered point of view" (Kazin "Essay" x). In the essay, I learned, "an open mind confronts an open reality" (Good 4), so there's "nothing you cannot do with it; no subject matter is forbidden, no structure is proscribed. You get to make up your own structure every time" (Dillard xxii). I soon came to understand that

the essay “has a strong tradition of formal freedom” (Holdheim 26) which allows writers “to think freely outside the constraints of established authority and traditional rhetorical forms” (M. Hall 78).

Cue Cole Porter and the band: “In olden days . . .”

Indeed, my first encounters with the essay impressed upon me that it is a realm of infinite discursive options. The essay, I read, celebrates “Chaos—the multiplicity and diversity of suppositions, words, ideas, and things, the infinite variations of reality and life” (Bensmaïa 9). It is “spontaneous, improvised” (Good ix), “arbitrary and impulsive” (Bensmaïa xxx), an “apparently unguided play of digressions and associations” (Holdheim 20). Even Montaigne, the originator of the genre, acknowledged that his essays are “without definite shape, having no order, sequence, or proportion other than accidental” (135): “I have no other marshal but fortune to arrange my bits,” he told me (297). The essay, I heard, is a genre marked by “play, innovation, and idiosyncrasy of both form and attitude” (Beale 155), by “sheer anarchic high spirits” (Sanders 662). I quickly came to appreciate that the “essay can be short or long, serious or trifling, about God and Spinoza, or about turtles and Cheapside” (Woolf “Modern” 293), that “within its generous boundaries one can do almost anything one wishes” (Epstein 411).

“ . . . a glimpse of stocking . . . ”

But the essay is not merely a warm fuzzy, not simply a free and open and fluid space in which we can stretch out and play as writers. Early in my relationship with the essay, I learned that it is really rather aggressive about its freedom, insistent and in your face about it. The essay is “a ‘weapon’ in the struggle for freedom of thought” (Chadbourne 146), I was told, a “gesture of freedom and defiance” (Kauffman “Theory” 186), a deliberate “step away from the path of obedient submission to the academic world” (Joeres and Mittman 20). In the essay, “freedoms [are] not so much exercised as seized over the border” (Hardwick xiv). It is “a text whose ideal of writing is to contest the rules of rhetoric” (Bensmaïa 31), and “its rejection of systems is its form-determining principle” (Kauffman “Theory” 191). Simply put, “essays defy all formal rules” (Holdheim 20) and emphasize the “violation of artistic rules” (Cherica 78). But in a larger sense, I heard that the “essay’s function is to oppose orthodoxy and reified thought of any kind” (Kauffman “Theory” 208), to serve, in fact, as a “permanent revolt against orthodoxy of any kind” (Kauffman “Path” 231), to

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enable and embody “subversion of received opinion and even of accepted rational processes of thought” (M. Hall 80). Even as a newcomer, I found myself relishing Adorno’s famous paradox that “the law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy” (171).

“... was looked on as something shocking...”

Since the essay is free, so too is the essayist. Early on, I came to know that “[t]he essayist is a self-liberated man” (White vii), a “free individual reporting and reflecting on his experience in defiance or disregard of authority” (Good 183). Since the essay “in no way impedes the soul’s freedom to explore and experiment” (Woolf “Montaigne” 95), “the essayist is inclined to let his mind roam free” (Kostelanetz 5). In sum, as one pair of commentators informed me,

The essayist is thus among the freest of all literary practitioners. There is imposed upon him no limit of either method or theme. There are no imperious and autocratic unities to trouble him. There are no conventions to curtail the liberty of his spirit. He may select any theme, treat it in any way, [...] act in all things as he pleases, with a complete disregard of any will but his own. (Dawson and Dawson 17)

Indeed, as Montaigne himself said of his own expansive liberty, “I undertake to speak indiscriminately of everything that comes to my fancy” (107).

“... now, heaven knows...”

Like the essay, the essayist does not merely luxuriate in his or her freedom as an individual. He or she is aggressive about it, insistent and in your face about it. Early on, I read that “the assertion of the self is the fundamental principle that makes the essay operative as a mode of expression. The ‘I’ is the source of all knowledge” (Cherica 191). “The essay is an act of personal witness,” I was told, the means by which “[s]elf and object are freed from their places in social and scientific systems respectively” (Good 23). Indeed, I learned that the essay is “the unique and unalterable form that a man’s inner life assumes in decisive thought” (Musil 301). Since essayists engage in “an unrepressed thinking-writing, a spontaneous flow of subjective responses around an object” (Good 31), I was faced with the realization that there “are as many kinds of essays as there are human attitudes or poses” (White vii), that, in fact, “[e]very essay is the only one of its kind” (Fakundiny 4).

“*Anything goes!*” I sang along.

Like the essay, the essayist does not merely luxuriate in his or her freedom as an individual. He or she is aggressive about it, insistent and in your face about it.

Stage Two: East Is East, and West Is West, and Never the Twain Shall Meet

At this point, after hearing numerous choruses from commentators on the essay about how it is a free and open discursive space of idiosyncratic and spontaneous development, one whose subversion of conventions of thinking and writing allows authors to liberate themselves aggressively, I began hearing echoes of other songs that harmonized perhaps too well with the one ringing in my ears. I heard reverberations of Rorty's distinction between normal and abnormal discourse: in the former, all participants agree to work within the same set of conventions governing the form and content of a group's discourse in order to maintain knowledge in the group; in the latter, participants set aside the conventions governing a group's discourse in order to generate new knowledge and thus remake the group in a more satisfactory way (Bruffee 643–48). The essay was clearly abnormal discourse. I then remembered Bakhtin's contrast between centripetal and centrifugal forces in discourse: The former strives to make things cohere and stay in place, to decrease difference, to stabilize and circumscribe the boundaries of language, to pull it toward uniformity and stasis, toward communal, conventional, standard, and orthodox forms; the latter seeks to keep things apart and in motion, to increase difference, to destabilize and stretch the boundaries of language, to create eclectic, idiosyncratic, hybrid forms and move toward personal, unconventional, even unique forms (270–72). The essay was clearly centrifugal discourse. And this

I began seeing the essay as existing way over at one end of the spectrum—the good end, to be sure—and almost everything I read after that seemed to only further cement this vision.

realization led me again to Foucault's scheme of "Institution" versus "Inclination": the former promises us the safety of established order and pre-prepared roles, emphasizing closure, constraint, the sacred and lawful; the latter dreams of a language without prohibitions, where writers can choose whatever roles they please, emphasizing openness, desire, the profane and unlawful (Spellmeyer 716–17). The essay seemed Inclination incarnate.

And by now, the polarized, schematic nature of the emerging picture was too attractive to resist. The binaries of Western metaphysics took over, and I went along for the ride. I began seeing the essay as existing way over at one end of the spectrum—the good end, to be sure—and almost everything I read after that seemed to only further cement this vision. Gass quite explicitly fulfilled the emerging design: "The essay," he said, "is obviously the opposite of that

awful object, 'the article.'" (25). "Obviously," I agreed. Krutch insisted "that 'essays' are written by introverts, 'articles' by extroverts" (1031). Hoagland contrasted the essay's organization, "the mind's natural flow," with that of an article, "a systematized outline of ideas" (223). James Hall noted how "the writer of articles [. . .] shouts from the rostrum," whereas the essayist "doesn't shout at all, but walks with you, engaged in an exhilarating give-and-take discussion" (57). Atkins discussed the essay's "[c]onversational and collegial" manner "in contrast to the argumentative and competitive (if not downright combative)" demeanor of the article (12). And Brashers maintained that "exposition seeks to fix, to define, to delimit, so that clarity and precision are perfect with a certain scope," whereas the "familiar [essay] mode tries to open, to stimulate, to inject multiple overtones, so that insight is expanded and pleasure is aroused" (154–55). It was all so clear, so right.

But the one text that did more than any other to carve this bifurcated and antagonistic scheme in stone for me was, oddly enough, Zeiger's classic piece on the essay from *College English*. The "essays of Montaigne are distinct in kind from those we demand of our composition students," he said (456): whereas "'exposition,' expresses the sequential activity of the left brain," exploration "expresses the holistic activity of the right brain" (457). According to Zeiger, in the essay we see

not logic, but intuition; not the rational order of left-brained, linear, sequential procedure, but the free association of right-brained, holistic, simultaneous play of alternatives. It is not the writer's reasoning which governs the familiar essay, but the writer's [. . .] irrational leaps. (461)

In contrast to exploration, he wrote, exposition works "to stop inquiry rather than to start it" (456), to "close rather than open the mind" (459), to "suspect and impeach" ideas rather than "accept and consider" them (459), to "bludgeon [. . .] an audience" rather than "tolerate the opinions of others" (464). Exposition uses a "severe, analytical tone," whereas exploration employs a "friendly, conversational tone" (463); exposition invokes members of its audience as "critical opponents," while exploration construes them as "co-inquirers" (458). Zeiger maintained that exposition "creates a logically exclusive, linear progression to a predetermined end," "to one and only one conclusion." Exploration, conversely, "does not pursue a linear sequence, but holds several possibilities in suspension simultaneously," he contended: "Rather than refute counter-arguments, [the essay] cultivates them" (456–57), and an "essay does not 'conclude,' but opens at the end" (461). In sum, Zeiger asserted, exposition

works to “confine the reader to a single, unambiguous line of thought,” while, in contrast, “an ‘exploratory’ essay [. . .] cultivates ambiguity and complexity” (462).

From here on out, there was no stopping the juggernaut. *Everything* I read about the essay fulfilled the polarized design with the exploratory essay (Good!!) at one extreme and the expository article (Bad!!) at the other. It was eerie. In class, I could (and did) fill up the blackboard with opposing descriptors in two distinct columns, one for the essay and one for the thesis-driven article. In addition to the ones already mentioned, I listed the following as well:

essay	article
inner-directed	outer-directed
the self	the world
subjective	objective
private	public
play	work
uncertainty	certainty
renewal	reinforcement
innovation	tradition
inconsistency	consistency
disorder	order
dispersion	unity
discontinuity	coherence
experiment	procedure
process	product
emotion	logic
complication	simplification
inefficient	efficient
feminine	masculine
visceral	cerebral
inclusion	exclusion
binding	dividing
dialogic	monologic
textured	flat

It was a thing of beauty, by god, and I worshipped it accordingly. Indeed, I asked my students to worship it as well. The left-hand column above became, roughly speaking, the grading criteria for their essays.

Stage Three: Never Let the Truth Get in the Way of a Good Story

Indeed, I continued to worship my beautiful design even when it failed to account for the facts of my lived experience with the essay. Eventually, for instance, students got brave enough to ask, “But what if I don’t *feel* uncertain, Dr. H? Am I *required* to be uncertain?” I didn’t know how to answer that. And the things we were reading in class were not behaving according to the plan either; their features could not be accounted for by the scheme; their movements, in fact, *contradicted* the design.

Daniel Harris’s “Effeminacy,” for example, tied us up in knots. On the one hand, it is clearly an essay. Since effeminacy is a taboo subject matter and, thus, even talking about it amounts to rejection of orthodoxy, Harris’s piece is undoubtedly abnormal, centrifugal, inclinational discourse. As Harris notes, “neither a forum nor [...] a *decorum* exists for the discussion of what amounts to an outlawed manner of walking and talking, a proscribed behavior” (265). His text opens the mind and starts inquiry into its subject by asking and exploring pointed questions such as “Why does an age so conscious of its victims turn a blind eye to the politics of the flaccid handshake and the insufficiently rigid swagger?” (266) and “Is effeminacy, as it is commonly understood, really an imitation of the opposite sex?” (267). It works to complicate rather than simplify its topic, to cultivate rather than eliminate ambiguity, by connecting effeminacy, androgyny, and camp in complex relationships. And it clearly operates as a weapon of thought, an act of defiance contesting and rejecting traditional thinking. Whereas, Harris notes, “The effeminate man in both American public life and popular iconography is *always* impersonating a woman” (267), in reality, “he is not so much imitative of women as he is *non-imitative* of men, for the state of effeminacy is characterized by a complete inattention to gender [...] is defined by the *absence* rather than by the presence of specific qualities [...] is nonrepresentational, an imitation of nothing” (268). His piece embodies the subversive, heretical, essayistic spirit, turning everything we think we knew about effeminacy precisely on its head.

On the other hand, Harris’s piece seems not to be an essay at all. Most obviously, its development doesn’t seem even *slightly* capricious; rather it appears to be tightly controlled and ordered in its organization. There is nothing impulsive, arbitrary, meandering, or roaming about it; its sequencing seems quite carefully and consciously crafted. In like manner, its discourse is neither essayistically heterogenous nor chaotic. In Harris’s text, we experience a singular voice and vision, a monological and linear treatment of the subject matter. Moreover, Harris’s treatment of the topic is almost entirely cerebral, logical,

and rational. There is none of the visceral or emotional or even irrational that we come to expect in the work of essayists. Furthermore, Harris is hardly uncertain in this piece; he is not holding multiple interpretations in suspension. He is quite certain in his analysis, argumentative even, impeaching the positions he disagrees with in a tone that borders on the bludgeoning:

- The effeminate “submit to a process of voluntary ghettoization that makes this most colorless of apartheid even more invisible, both to others and, more importantly, to themselves [. . .] [T]hey conveniently flee into an arty barrio of so-called ‘accepting’ professions” (266).
- “[W]e have created a new Frankenstein—the ‘good gay,’ masculine, assimilated, forceful, deliberate, his body no longer a boneless frenzy of the threshing arms and legs but a militarized automaton patrolling his beat at a brisk goosestep” (268–69).
- “Those who acquire [camp’s] addictive taste are in constant danger of falling prey to its seductive false politics which [. . .] will ultimately turn them into clowns and harlequins, dancing bears and bearded ladies” (272).

Finally, Harris’s text also breaks from the essayistic scheme by decidedly *not* foregrounding the “I” of the author. It is distinctly not introverted, subjective, nor private discourse. There is no explicit assertion of the self anywhere in the text. In fact, the word I does not appear in it at all. The closest we come to this hallmark of essayistic writing is when Harris, in discussing “homosexual machismo,” says, “The subculture *we* thought would enable *us* to be more *ourselves* has in fact encouraged *us* to be less so” (269, italics mine).

Scratching my head, faced with the realization that the facts of this text didn’t fit with my beautiful model, I at first concluded that “Effeminacy” was simply *not* an essay after all, despite the fact that I found it in a strong anthology of essays. It *couldn’t* be an essay. But then we read something like Joan Didion’s ubiquitously anthologized “On Morality” . . .

Like Harris’s text, Didion’s is, on the one hand, most certainly an essay. It begins with both the stereotypical signature of the essayist—the assertion of the self and the foregrounding of the private, subjective, authorial “I”—and with an explicit announcement of its spontaneous, improvised structure:

As it happens, I am in Death Valley, in a room at the Enterprise Motel and Trailer Park, and it is July, and it is hot. In fact it is 119°. I cannot seem to make the air

conditioner work, but there is a small refrigerator, and I can wrap ice cubes in a towel and hold them against the small of my back. With the help of the ice cubes, I have been trying to think. (157)

Didion's piece then develops in what appears to be an accidental, unguided, discontinuous play of free associations and digressions, one bound only by the author's voice and personality. First, she recounts a story from a nurse about her husband's staying with a body overnight by the side of the highway; next she notes how one of the basic "promises we make to one another is that we try to retrieve our casualties" (158); then she offers a minihistory lesson about the Donner Party and the Jayhawkers; after that, she relates the story of a diver who apparently lost his mind trying to retrieve a drowning victim; then she spends a paragraph telling us, moment by moment, about what she can and cannot hear from her motel room: gospel singers, coyotes, a bar room jukebox, a rattlesnake, "a faucet, a paper rustling, the wind" (160).

Here Didion pauses for a moment to ask "What does it mean?" She answers herself that "It means nothing manageable," thus embracing the uncertainty that so often identifies exploratory, essayistic discourse. Her text then works to start inquiry, to open our mind, to subvert our inherited traditional notions of morality by asking a rather difficult and heretical question: "Except on the most primitive level—our loyalties to those we love—what could be more arrogant than to claim the primacy of personal conscience?" (161). Didion's piece also features a heterogenous, dialogic development, one in which we hear voices as divergent as the nurse, a rabbi, Marion Faye, Lionel Trilling, and Didion herself. Finally, she twice directly invokes the reader as a coinquirer through a conversational, collegial give-and-take:

- You are quite possibly impatient with me by now; I am talking, you want to say, about a "morality" so primitive that it scarcely deserves a name. (159)
- Of course you will say that I do not have the right, even if I had the power, to inflict that unreasonable conscience upon you; nor do I want you to inflict your conscience, however reasonable upon me. (161)

Yet despite these many essayistic features, Didion's text concludes in a most un-essayistic way. After her various peregrinations, her last paragraph nonetheless pushes the reader to accept her singular, unambiguous conclusion, which she states with dogmatic certainty: "You see I want to be quite obstinate about insisting that we have no way of knowing—beyond that fun-

damental loyalty to the social code—what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong,’ what is ‘good’ and what is ‘evil’” (162). The rest of the paragraph likewise breaks with the essayistic code by shifting to foreground not the private but the public, not the self but the world, not “I” but “we.” Her text becomes more and more outer-directed until she states that our misunderstanding of what morality actually is has led us “to join the fashionable madmen, and then is when the thin whine of hysteria is heard in the land, and then is when we are in bad trouble” (163).

But Didion, I squirmed, is the *quintessential* modern essayist, dang it! This *has to* be an essay. But it was not an essay—not according to the scheme, at least. And then the scheme began to crumble. And as I took the blinders off and read on, I came to understand that practically no real, living, breathing essay actually lived up to my beautiful abstraction.

Stage Four: There and Back Again

It has been a long row to hoe, but I have come to understand that, despite the aesthetically and cognitively pleasing simplicity of my scheme, exploration and exposition are not mutually exclusive entities. Similarly, I now understand that exploration does not (at least *need not*) *precede* exposition either. The “essay”

As writers, it is not a matter of choosing between the essay and the article, but rather a case of understanding that these are opposing extremes on a continuum of possibilities and choices for framing and developing our prose.

and the “article” are conceptually pure extremes that can help clarify our thinking about analytical nonfiction, but these absolutes do not hold in the real world of writing. As writers, it is not a matter of choosing between the essay and the article, but rather a case of understanding that these are opposing extremes on a continuum of possibilities and choices for framing and devel-

oping our prose: the essay and the article are the infrared and the ultraviolet, but real people live and write in some glorious hue of visible light between them, locating their nonfiction along the infinite gradations within red-orange-yellow-green-blue-indigo-violet. All of the wonderful, tension-filled, oppositions I like to line up antiseptically under the monikers of “essay” and “article,” “exploration” and “exposition,” actually live side by side in the same untidy houses. Some of these houses have red-orange walls, and some blue-green, and so on. But each is a vibrant, unique, and terribly interesting place to stop and think a while. This may not be news to you, but it took me ten years to figure out and put into my teaching practice.

My hard-earned acknowledgment of the complex, hybrid nature of essayistic writing has allowed me to finally fashion nuanced and usable grading

criteria, a rubric that student writers can employ to move their writing as much toward the essayistic end of the spectrum as possible (which is where I still want them to go) without straining their honesty or fictionalizing their stances toward their subjects. In each case, the shift involves a simple move from delineating what the student's text *must* do to what it *can* (but is not required to) do as an essay, involves refashioning requirements into options, which I happily encourage students to take up:

- The essay may offer multiple perspectives on its subject, weigh alternative (even contradictory) points of view, broaden rather than narrow one's vision.
- The essay may be skeptical (if not subversive) of conventional wisdom about its subject.
- The essay may problematize or complicate its subject rather than simplifying it.
- The essay may be exploratory, going beyond the already known.
- The essay may invite the reader to participate in thinking.
- The essay may cross disciplinary boundaries.
- The essay may utilize multiple discourses, multiple voices.
- The essay may make frequent use of "blessed particulars" (see Corder), highly specific (often sensory-based) details.
- The essay may demonstrate the structure of cognition in progress, the path(s) of the writer's evolving thought(s), his or her mental journey, thinking down the page, "free association artistically controlled" (see Huxley).
- The essay may demonstrate style, art, craft in highly-wrought prose.
- The essay may embody a characteristic "voice" or self of the writer (idiosyncratic personality).
- The essay may be uncertain, inconclusive, tentative, provisional.
- The essay may pose difficult questions that the writer attempts to work through on paper.

Conclusion: Implications for (Not) Teaching

As I step back from what I have rendered here, as I look at the outline of the somewhat tortured development of my thinking about the essay, I can't help thinking that it looks like a skewed version of Perry's scale of intellectual development. Based on his observations of undergraduate students at Harvard, Perry argued that first-year students frequently exhibited dualistic, right/wrong, binary thinking. As they progressed in their studies, students then moved into relativistic, "anything goes" thinking. Finally, as they were preparing to graduate, some of the students, at least, had come to understand the need to make commitments to positions within that relativity. For me, the first two stages seem to be transposed: my "anything goes" phase with the essay came first, followed by a hardening into binary, either/or thinking. No matter: I am only now coming to understand how to live and write in the complexities of a both/and kind of universe, to make commitments to positions within the continuum of the visible spectrum between infrared and ultraviolet, in the flux between essay and article, exploration and exposition. It hasn't been easy.

In like manner, as I step back from recounting my own evolution with the essay, I can't help thinking of Ernst Haeckel's famous (now infamous) "Biogenetic Law." In the 1860s, Haeckel began professing that *ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny*. He argued that as an embryo of a species develops, its individual growth repeats the stages in the evolutionary history of that species as a whole. Haeckel produced a series of drawings overemphasizing similarities among embryos of different species to demonstrate, for example, how human embryos progressed in stages from fish through reptiles to mammals. His theory has been thoroughly discounted as a fraud in the realm of evolutionary biology

My experience over the last sixteen years seems to suggest that my students (god bless 'em) evolve into their understandings of the essay along a very similar path to mine.

(and, I should note, it has been used by groups as diverse as the Nazis and Creationists as support for their causes). But despite all this, I find myself wondering whether it might nonetheless be a useful analog for those of us who want to teach

essayism. Could it be that we cannot teach essayism so much as let each individual student evolve into it, repeating in his or her own way the struggles we have gone through to achieve *our own* peace with the complexities of the form? My experience over the last sixteen years seems to suggest that my students (god bless 'em) evolve into their understandings of the essay along a very similar path to mine: could it be that, as far as essayists go, at least, ontogeny does indeed recapitulate phylogeny?

In coming to understand the essay, all I had to change was everything—several times, in fact. All I had to do was move through all three stages in Perry’s scheme of intellectual development. Not surprisingly, this process took a *long* time. This sort of radical change and growth cannot happen overnight, of course, except in those rare cases of miraculous enlightenment and transformation. Most of us need significant time to evolve into such understandings, and the baby steps and missteps required can be frustrating and humbling. But I am not sure how much others can really help us along the way if we are to appreciate and possess such growth and learning in the end as truly our own. And I am likewise not sure we can shorten this evolutionary process for others at all without ultimately diminishing them and thwarting their development.

In any event, I have not yet figured out how to teach essayism beyond asking students to walk the same path I did, wrestle through the same frustrations and confusions I did, reach the same impasses I did, and ultimately break through to their own understandings of the essay, just as I did. I can point them down the path, but I cannot show them shortcuts; I can accompany them, but I cannot walk the path for them. They have to do that themselves. The pedagogy is simple and yet not easy: I have them read the same things I did, I keep my big mouth shut as much as I can, I try only to pose questions and encourage them, and I assure them that they are making progress. The problem is one of time. It took me a decade to come to grips with the essay; I don’t see how we can expect students to do the same in fifteen weeks. If we truly want students to come to understand essayism in any kind of lasting way that they themselves own, it seems to me we will need to start pushing for longer sequences of writing instruction, start advocating for curricular possibilities in which students can work with the same instructor for two consecutive semesters or more.

As I wind down here, I do not regret that it has taken me this long to appreciate the wonderfully complex, dappled nature of the essay. I would not be standing where I am now without having taken every last stumble and wrong turn. It’s all good, as they say. In hindsight, I realize that some of the folks I read early on had hinted at the essay’s pied beauty, but I was not yet ready to hear what they offered. The “essay is the most adaptable of all forms,” (Dobrée 47), I was told, one known for its “extraordinary flexibility” (Hoagland 224), “wonderful malleability” (Atwan x), “maximal fluidity” and “‘ameba-like’ versatil-

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ity” (Richman ix). I read that the “essay is a pair of baggy pants into which nearly anyone or anything can fit,” a “shapeless, bottomless, lovely receptacle” (Epstein 400; 402). Indeed, “its respect for diversity, heterogeneity, and impurity” (Atkins 16) are so great that it becomes “a harmonious hodgepodge” (Bensmaïa 34). What once seemed the vaguest, most slippery descriptions of the form now seem the most apt and useful.

II. August 2005

This is perhaps a perfect or a terrible time for me to be writing, I’m not sure. I’m testy—restless, irritable, and discontented. I am struggling with a deeply felt sense of loss and flux, stuck between who I was and what I used to do and where I might be going. My father passed away in April; my mother in 2001. The people who nurtured me in our field are mostly retired now, and more than a few have died. I just turned 43. By the time this appears in print, I will have been in this profession for twenty years (I met my wife on my birthday, which just happened to be the first day of our GTA Orientation at Colorado

State University—August 20, 1986). After ten years of administrative work, I am turning my focus toward research or teaching or creative work and trying to decide where I want to invest my increasingly scarce energies. In

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short, I’m about halfway through my career, and I’m trying to decide what to do with the second half of it. I am struck by the unseemliness of complaining about such a luxury.

In addition, this is not the piece I thought I was writing. But such is often the case when writing essays: we end up in unexpected places. In the time since I wrote the original manuscript above, smart people have read it and responded to it, and I have been reading and responding to the work of the smart people. As I have pushed back against and been pulled along by these other voices, the writing has gone in new directions. One person asked me to think about why such a deep split opened between exposition and the essay in the first place, about why so many of us want to believe in the openness of the essay. Another asked me, bluntly, “But what’s your focus? What’s your point?” While I resist the call to have my thoughts and language incline toward some singular assertion, I will nonetheless try to present my meanings more pointedly.



I have been thinking carefully about why I have spent so much time and energy trying to define and advocate for the essay in sharp contradistinction to exposition. I'm not proud of some of the things I have discovered. For instance, one reason I want students to write essays is I simply, selfishly, want more interesting things to read from them. Clarity and order are virtues, no doubt, but overdone they produce prose that is flat, predictable, and boring. As Hoy says, academic discourse "holds fast to its legitimacy in this compositional world of ours, even when it sends us fast asleep as we try to read it" (353). The essay, on the other hand, features "surprising vectors of words" (Retallack 32) and "unexpected turns" (W. Harris 936). DuPlessis notes that in the essay we see "peculiar and unstable mixtures" (32), "language in all its density and snarls [. . .] burrs, leaps, expostulations, and fleshiness" (22). Thus, as Retallack says, essays "give the reader real work to do" (32); they "require collaboration with an ardent reader" (33). I want to be an ardent reader of my students' work, not merely a grader. It's not fair, it's not right, and it's not ethical how I gut and process their texts, how I scan their words for schematics of thought and correctness, for only the most obvious strengths and grossest weaknesses, but I think the institutionalized form of exposition itself contributes considerably to creating this role. Thesis-driven texts don't need me; they are self-contained and self-filling. Given what I could be doing (and have done) to put food on the table, getting paid to read and write is an astonishingly cushy life. Still, I find myself wanting more interesting things to read from my students.

The ideas of pleasure reading and student writing seem contradictory, but it shouldn't and doesn't have to be that way.

And I want to enjoy that reading more. The ideas of pleasure reading and student writing seem contradictory, but it shouldn't and doesn't have to be that way. In the essay, DuPlessis contends, "Pleasure is everywhere inside the writing—in all the crevices we can explore" (27). Indeed, this pleasure need not simply be in the reception of the text. It could and should be in the production of the text as well. In essays, Retallack says, we see "the play of minds in pursuit of both pleasure and meaning, the pleasure of *making* meaning" (37, my italics). Likewise, Harvey suggests, essayists often demonstrate "pleasure, sometimes wonder, even passion, in a willingness to pursue a topic" (650). The prospect of students writing with pleasure—and instructors reading that writing with pleasure—makes me giddy.

Harvey's comment brings us to a third reason why I have pushed so hard for the essay over exposition: emotion. If writing is thinking, I want—and I want my students to experience—a greater range of thinking. Indeed, I also

want—and I want my students to experience too—*feeling* in their writing. Exposition is “masculine,” rational, logical to a fault. Its strictures cut us off from half of our natures, from our affect, from half of the way we make sense of the world. It is incomplete and not fully human, whereas the essay can be, as DuPlessis says, a “nexus of [. . .] fury, passion, and hope” (23), a text that foregrounds both “ferocity” (28) and “spiritual joy” (20). There is, of course, emotional content to students’ expository prose, but too often, it seems to me, those emotions revolve around frustration and resentment about what they are not permitted to say and are expressed “sideways” as oppositional behaviors. “The choice of the essay mode,” DuPlessis says, “is no guarantee of quality, just of desire” (26). But imagine if students really desired to write, if they felt strongly not just about their topics but about their writing, too, and expressed those feelings in their texts.

When we start sharing our feelings with one another, we enter a very different kind of relationship, of course—a chancy one. “The essay is an intimate form,” Angyal says (66); and its “intimacy between speaker and listener,” Smith elaborates, is “characterized by gradualness (or repetitions of the same object/idea with slow modifications over time)” (para. 2). I find that I want more gentleness in student writing, fewer sledgehammers, more intimacy, fewer pronouncements. I want less shrill, less reductive, less hortatory, less didactic stuff to read and respond to. I want students to say “think about this” to me more than they say “believe this.” I want them to spend time for me and with me, not rush in and shout at me and rush off. As Wendell Harris says, “It is a matter of shifting the relation between the writer and the reader, moving from ‘I will lead you to the truth’ (or ‘I will give you the facts’) to ‘I’m sharing my vision’” (949). In sum, I don’t want *anyone* announcing his or her truths at me these days. I don’t want anyone imposing his or her truths *upon* me—not the government, not the media, not my colleagues, and not my students.

It seems I want more and better and richer contact with the people in my classes, and I want that contact to be sustained beyond our meeting times through their writing. And essays, more than exposition, allow for that possibility through what Harvey calls “presence”: “the concept we invoke when we feel life in writing, when we feel an individual invested in the subject and freely directing the essay—not surrendering control to a discipline’s conventions or a party line” (650). Presence means “sensing a person” (Harvey 653) or feeling “contact with a fascinating mind” (W. Harris 942) through the writing rather than merely encountering what has been called the projection of an institutional role (see Perelman). I freely admit that it is, in part, the loss of life I have

felt recently that makes me cringe so at the thought of having to deal with lifeless writing. And I likewise freely admit that my desire for richer contact with my students runs the risk of uncritically collapsing the difference between the people who write essays and the personae who are present in those essays. As Bloom writes, “The essayist-in-the-essay [. . .] is actually a work of art to which readers—even those sophisticated enough to know the character represented is a carefully constructed artifact—respond as if it were the real person” (“Essayist” 94). “For better or for worse,” she says, “readers respond as if that first person were a real person” (“Essayist” 97). To put it another way, Bloom maintains that we assume the essayist-in-the-essay “to be intellectually and ethically congruent with the writer” (“Essayist” 100). But truth be told, this is what we always assume with student writers. The only time we assume a disjunction between the expositor-in-the-exposition and the writer of the text is when we suspect a student of plagiarism. It is naïveté, I suppose, to think that in responding to student writing, I am addressing the real person who stands behind it. Even so, this supposition really is an article of faith in our profession, one on which the entire project of responding to student writing necessarily rests. When I address the writer as “you” in the margins (“You need more supporting evidence here,” etc.) or by first name in my end comments, I am assuming an unproblematic relationship between the (perhaps implicit) “I” in the text, the persona, and the person who wrote the text. It is equally naïve, I suppose, to trust that students are being honest in their nonfiction writing (regardless of the genre), that their personae are not wildly divergent from their “true” selves. But I will continue to believe that students put as much of their true selves into their writing personae as possible, given the limits of human language and orthography, because to assume otherwise would lead to ontological quandaries that would make dialogue with students about their writing practically impossible. In short, I have been pushing for the essay at the expense of exposition because the essay would seem to allow for a greater correlation between person and personae, for a larger portion of the mostly hidden iceberg of self to emerge in the students’ writing. To put it another way, I care deeply about the essay precisely because I care deeply about the student essayist who is both behind and in the essay.

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Although Haefner could once argue that behind the essay lay “the shibboleth of individualism” (127), that the essay, seen as the uncritical effusion of

a god-given self, was “a useful tool in propagating the myth of individualistic expression” (131), I think we have come instead to see the essay as a powerful vehicle for examining the social construction of one’s self. Faery suggests that the essay “offers a means of challenging [. . .] the notion of a fixed and unified subjectivity” (62), and DuPlessis contends that “this desire to scrutinize the ideologies and powers at work in one’s sociocultural formation is one strong source for the contemporary essay” (18). My concern about the violence done to young people’s identities as they pass into, through, and out of the university has only increased over time. As Harvey notes, “since institutions and disciplines tend to construct the perceiving self and to silence Other other voices, we want to foreground (as we say) the writing subject as much as the subject of the writing” (643) [capitalization correct]. Indeed, I think that students’ identities are the most important texts they will ever read and write; that the exploring, composing, and expressing of their selves is the most important act of interpretation and writing they will ever undertake; and that the essay is a far better vehicle for this work than exposition. Given all the relationships we want students to scrutinize and develop—their relationships with popular culture, literary texts, civic discourse, digital discourse, social structures and knowledges of all kinds—I find it odd that we still shy away from helping them scrutinize and develop *the* central relationship in their lives, the one they must have a critically conscious understanding of if they are to enter into a critically conscious relationship with anything else: their relationships with their selves. As Faery maintains, “essays allow students to discover and claim or repudiate the fluid, multiple selves which constitute their social identity and which they must learn to accommodate if they are to understand the contemporary world, their various and shifting positions within it, and their responsibilities to how it evolves” (63). Recchio likewise suggests we see “the essay as a writing practice where self formation and cultural formation proceed in a dialogical relationship, with self dependent on culture for its potential forms and culture dependent on many selves for its composition” (224). The students I know are desperate to be individuals, to announce their uniqueness in the universe, but their cultural resources for fashioning themselves are limited and limiting. I see young people struggling to forge some kind of differential between themselves and their peers by getting ever greater numbers of ever-larger tattoos, for example, or ever-greater numbers of ever-riskier piercings, writing cliché upon cliché upon their bodies in a misguided effort to be original. Who better than us to help students compose and revise the discursive artifact of selfhood? Ontology—from the Greek for “being” and “word.” Who better than us (in-

deed, who *besides* us) to help students understand the ontological functions of *style* in writing? And what better vehicle than the essay?

Another reason I have been pushing so hard for an arch definition of the essay and for the use of the essay in teaching writing is that college-level writing instruction, it seems to me, should offer students something that is decidedly different from what they had in secondary school. That seems so obvious that I feel silly for saying it. Nevertheless, since an operational definition for insanity is “doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results,” we composition teachers may be insane: we have been pummeling students with thesis-driven writing in school for ten years, typically, before they come to college, yet we persist in the delusion that *this* time it will be different, that *this* time they will get it. But such an assumption is clearly flawed or terribly arrogant: Despite years of repeated previous attempts, our students obviously have not yet gotten it (because they otherwise would not be placed in our first-year composition classes), so how could another semester or two of almost exactly the same thing make any real difference? The only way we can believe our courses will somehow succeed where years of previous attempts have failed is to assume that we are vastly superior teachers than those working in primary and secondary schools, an assumption I find patently objectionable. I have pushed for a strong definition to rescue the essay from the years of associations students have with school-based writing—to divorce the essay from the themes, formula, correctness, punishment, and drudgery that still seems to characterize expository writing instruction for too many students and teachers. I want students to regain some sense of joy and play with their writing, agency, and ownership over their writing—they had this once, early in their schooling—but exposition seems irrevocably tied, rather, to the “same old same old,” to duty, to the pain of doing little more than making their writing conform to some mold, a mold they still remain mystified by, despite years of exposure and practice.

In like manner, I think college-level writing instruction should ask students to do something that is *difficult*, something that strives for more than mere competence. Bill McBride at Colorado State taught me about the magnificent failure theory—that a magnificent failure is always better than a mediocre success—and I have tried to instill this mindset in every student I have worked with. The essay is a difficult genre, one well-suited for such efforts to go beyond minimal expectations. As Hesse writes, “one of the characteristics of the contemporary essay is the attempt to cast the widest net of associations possible, then struggle to bring the gathered ideas into some meaningful rela-

tion" (36); another is the "author's attempt to create a satisfying and finished verbal artifact out of the materials at hand" (37), to create "a well-made whole" (39). But *difficulty* and *struggle* seem like dirty words somehow in composition classes. Of late, I have been struck by my students' assumption that their English classes should be both easy and fun, by their sometimes vociferous complaints when I push them beyond their comfort zones, requiring them to move beyond well-worn reading, thinking, and writing processes and utterly predictable expository forms. Do they think their biology or economics courses should be easy and fun? Of course not, which makes me wonder how complicit

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we are in this dynamic. What have we done to warrant this assumption about our courses? College-level writing courses should, it seems to me, slow down the process of composition; complicate it; cordon off the easier softer way, make students work harder, work fundamentally differently than they did in secondary school. I frequently tell my students that we do things in our

class precisely because they are difficult, precisely because these things are unlike what they have done before. And the essay, as contradistinct from expository prose, gives me an unequivocal way of signaling that difference and difficulty to my students. As Hewett says of her earliest attempts with the essay, "The moment I stepped away from the academy was one of precariousness and danger" (733). And with this precariousness and danger comes hyper-awareness, to be sure: the essay shakes students awake, forces them out of their somnambulant approach to composition classes. Students can't crank out an effective essay the way they can a serviceable piece of exposition. The novelty and difficulty make "phoning in" an effective essay practically impossible.

I have pushed for a polarized definition of the essay as contradistinct from exposition because I want to assign, foster, and read something that might last, that might have meaning and life outside the course requirements, even outside the university experience. Students' lives are inundated with ephemeral texts. Digital texts evaporate in moments; television and movie images rarely last more than a couple of seconds; students sell their textbooks (even novels and volumes of poetry) back to the bookstore at the end of the semester; and, alas, they have been known to drop returned academic papers into the wastebasket on the way out of the classroom after scanning for their grades. Undergraduate expository academic texts exist for the purposes of an assign-

ment, for a month or so, typically. They usually have no life outside of that time frame (unless they are selected for a portfolio or are cribbed by some other student). Furthermore, students are not answerable, not *responsible* for their prose; it is a function of the calcified deployment of exposition in our schools and their roles as producers of that discourse; they don't own their writing, and they know it; the writing is not personally meaningful for them, and it shows. It is disposable. In my experience, however, essays are something that last at least a little bit longer, that students hold on to at least a little bit longer. To put it another way, I have pushed for a polarized definition of the essay in an effort to make first-year composition courses and the writing that is produced in those courses valuable *now*, in their *own* right, not as preparatory to anything. One reason students have so little motivation to work hard in our classes, it seems to me, is that there is no strong reward for doing so outside the grades they will receive. The real payoff for working on their writing is endlessly deferred. We offer them little more than the vague promise of a mystical payoff somewhere in the misty future: "You'll need these skills when you get to English 102," we suggest, "your major, the workplace, 'the real world.'" The value of essays, on the other hand, is both immediate and lasting because it is intensely personal. As Jim Corder once told me, essays can be archival: they can capture who and how and why you are the way(s) you are at some particular moment. That kind of knowledge might last, might have value beyond an assignment, or a course, or the university.

The value of essays, on the other hand, is both immediate and lasting because it is intensely personal.

I have pushed for an extreme definition of the essay so that I might talk about it with at least the possibility of some kind of precision and force. As Hesse notes, "Within the academy the term 'essay' has evolved into a generic term for all works of prose nonfiction short enough to be read in a single sitting" (35). In other words, it signifies almost nothing by signifying almost anything. I pushed for a polarized definition of the essay as contradistinct to exposition in an effort to finally say what it *is* rather than repeating the tired, too-easy, and ultimately unhelpful strategy of saying what it is *not*. I pushed for an arch definition in an effort to do away with all the prefatory adjectives (*personal, familiar, critical, philosophical, literary, formal, etc.*) that have attached themselves to the essay over time. In contrast to the adjectives we use to modify "poetry," for instance (*lyrical, pastoral, confessional, etc.*), which work to increase critical specificity by more carefully delineating the thing under discussion, the adjectives we use to modify "essay," rather, seem to be political

efforts to either diminish or elevate the stature of the genre, but in any event do not offer any increase in specificity. I have pushed for a polarized definition of the essay as part of a larger collective effort to garner critical and theoretical respectability for the essay, but it is now clear that I did so in an effort to raise composition and composition faculty up to the levels of creative writing and/or literature and their faculty, to raise composition and composition faculty above business and technical writing and their faculty. I'm not proud of that. But I am proud of a parallel motive: I pushed for a polarized definition of the essay in the hope that it might help us create a place and a role for composition that doesn't serve other disciplines or other parts of English studies, that doesn't fashion faculty or students to serve other disciplines or other parts of English studies. But to date, as Bloom notes, all of my and our pushing does not seem to have made much of a dent: "Essays might as well be written in invisible ink as far as the calls for proposals of the conferences of our two major professional organizations, CCC and MLA, are concerned" ("Canon" 423).

I have pushed for a polarized definition of the essay because the essay is an overtly politicized genre and advocating for it is a political act. "If in times of rampant fundamentalism complex thought is a political act," Retallack says, "then the essay is at least a poethical wager" (33) [spelling correct]. Similarly, DuPlessis describes the essay as "[p]oliticized, poetic prose" (17), "a practice learned [. . .] through the scrutiny of official lies, [. . .] reborn out of (loosely) the long reverberations of the sixties in U.S. thought" (23). In a time when the stakes are literally life and death for countless people and doubt and caution are called treason and slander and cowardice and stupidity, we need to foster considerably more comfort in our students for uncertainty and patience and depth of thought. In a time when we are given only smaller and smaller, simpler and simpler bits of official thought and language with which to work, in a time when "the war on terror" has shifted stealthily to become "the global struggle against extremism," signaling an entire shift of ideology and stragem in our national defense and foreign affairs with the verbal equivalent of a new emoticon (a double-winky?), we need to encourage student use of a genre that enacts a "cunning scrutiny of social and cultural texts" (DuPlessis 23) and to help them pay considerably more attention to longer and more complex texts, to developing single texts in greater and more sophisticated depth. In a time when, no matter what the question, we are simply told, time and time again, by the highest official in our country that "we're making progress, stay the course," we need to help students understand the ethical necessity of "response, responsibility, responsiveness, even under pall" (DuPlessis 17) that the

essay embodies. In a time when public discourse on political issues has devolved into mere shouting and vitriol, our students need more experience and practice with forms that don't lend themselves to single perspectives and facile rejection of alternative views. As DuPlessis writes, "Far from being an exercise in narcissism, [. . .] essays are practices in multiplicity, in polyvocality, in intercutting other opinions, in offering heterogeneous, faceted perspectives" (32). Thirty-five years ago, Fort suggested that in thesis-driven writing "is found the same manifestation of the 'proper' attitudes toward authority that would be found in almost any of the institutions in our society" (635). Last year, during the run-up to the election, a good friend of mine who is writing his dissertation, someone I consider to be a reasonable and intelligent person, said, with no trace of irony or hint of doubt, that "In a time of war, good citizens must support the president, no matter what, no questions asked." These two statements are inextricably linked in my head. Discourse forms enact values. Suffice it to say that I have a very different definition of what it means to be a good citizen, and I want my students to have access to and practice with a form that embodies a different set of values.



In the time since I finished working on the original manuscript for this piece, I have found, to my surprise and embarrassment, that I am hardly the first person to suggest that we should see the essay and thesis-driven article not as mutually exclusive entities but as being at two ends of a continuum and that we need to start mapping out the spaces between the poles. Eleven years ago, Harvey asked us "to consider the continuities that exist between good personal and good textual essays [. . . to change] our metaphors for the essay, which currently, for all our talk of blurred genres and border-crossings, tend to be dualistic, picturing the personal and the textual as different ingredients or categories" (649). In like manner, nine years ago, Harris argued that "while the dry-as-dust article that strives to create an atmosphere of total objectivity lies at the opposite end of the spectrum of nonfiction from the personal essay, there is a great deal of territory to be mapped in between" (938). So why, then, did I feel the need to make the very same suggestion? Granted, I hadn't done my homework well enough and simply hadn't read these texts. But more to the point, I think, is that in the intervening decade, despite Harvey's and Harris's calls, no work had been done on this front. The gap and the need were (are) still there, hence my felt need to fill them. We still see the essay and the article

as radically divergent, despite calls for us to envision a “new” essay, one that combines “rhetoric *and* poetic and electronic,” for instance (Vielstimming [Spooner and Yancey] 114).

We have yet to get rhetoric and poetic (let alone electronic) under our one roof in composition. We keep fighting each other for the scant space. Despite two distinct “personal turns” in the field over the last thirty years (see Ratcliffe), we still can’t find room for the essay, the expressive, the personal. I don’t think the requests for space have been unreasonable. Eleven years ago, for instance, Elbow explained that he was “simply jostling for fifty percent of the bed” (66). Nine years ago, Forman introduced her collection by noting that “Taken as a whole, the essays in *What Do I Know?* argue for the inclusion of the essay in the academy as a genre to be read and written” (2). And seven years ago, Hesse concluded yet another call for the use of the genre by saying “I’m emphatically not arguing for the essay as the sole or even main genre for writing instruction. I’m arguing that it needs to be in the mix” (47). The personal is still excluded, generally speaking, and the essay is still not in the mix, despite years of effort and a small sea of ink shed on its behalf. And so I fear that this, my most impassioned plea for the essay to date, will nonetheless likewise fall on deaf ears.

The problem seems to be that there are simply too many things we want to accomplish, too many things we think are crucially important to fit into the cramped space of composition. We are a diverse lot. We have a very big tent in composition, but we are trying to pitch it on a postage stamp. How can we possibly hope, in the space of fifteen or thirty weeks, to honor and do justice to rhetoric, poetic, *and* electronic; written, oral, digital, *and* multimodal composition; literary, popular, *and* technical discourse; personal, academic, *and* civic discourse; individual *and* collaborative composition; syntactic *and* paratactic organization; critical thinking, reading, writing, speaking *and* listening? Since we can’t do everything, the only pragmatic response is to pick this or that, this over that. Our diversity, that is, our diverse commitments, require us to foreground our concerns at the expense of others’ and to hold on tenaciously to whatever turf we have won for our causes. There is no percentage in trying to build synergistic combinations; anything “they” try to add to “our” already bursting curriculum is rightfully seen as an intrusion, an impossibility, as something that can only lower the overall quality of instruction by diluting it. So we dig in and get defensive. As Hoy puts it, “we pitch our tents around differences, begin to build our separate camps, draw

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our lines in the sand . . .] acting more like armed warriors than rhetorical seers, we writing teachers often miss the opportunity to steal out of our tents during the night and cross the battle lines in search of hidden delights” (353). The martial metaphor is familiar, but what is not stated is what, exactly, we are fighting over. I used to think it was the field, the profession, the discipline, fighting for the ascendancy of one theory, one knowledge, one perspective over another. Now I think it is far simpler and more dire than that. I think we are fighting each other over the cramped, overpopulated, and terribly impoverished space of the first-year composition classroom, over the fifteen or thirty weeks of instruction we have settled for in our students’ lives.

And I think *we have* settled. While we have made an enormous increase in the number of graduate programs in rhetoric and composition over the last twenty years, we have yet to make a concerted effort to expand undergraduate composition programs, despite repeated calls for us to do so (see Trimbur and Yancey, for instance). Advanced composition courses seem to have mostly disappeared: some have become part of WAC/WID programs, some have been subsumed under burgeoning business and technical writing programs, but many, I suspect, simply withered because of a lack of strong identity and a lack of strong articulation to their first-year composition sequences. As far as students are concerned, English 102 is the end of the road for composition, and good riddance. And we have done very little to address this belief.

I am tired of us fighting each other over our common territory. I am tired of rehearsing old arguments—and tired of searching for new arguments—all in the effort to pry open some curricular space within the tiny confines of the first-year that might honor our conceptual richness and diversity. And while I am not sure what I want to do with the second half of my career, I am quite sure I *don’t* want to keep

doing *this*. Simply put, the work we have to do is too important to try to cram it into a single year. We sell ourselves and our students quite short by capitulating to this scheme simply because this is the way it has always been. The issue is not what students *must* have, given that this may be their only college composition class. The issue is that students should have *all* of these things—rhetoric, poetic, *and* electronic; written, oral, digital, *and* multimodal composition; literary, popular, *and* technical discourse; personal, academic, *and* civic

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discourse; individual *and* collaborative composition; syntactic *and* paratactic organization; critical thinking, reading, writing, speaking *and* listening. The issue is that students need all of these knowledges and experiences, in depth and detail, and that providing such instruction and practice effectively will require *many* composition classes. We need, as a profession and as a professional organization, not just as individual institutions or programs or faculty members, to push the place of composition, per se, beyond merely the first year. The goal would not be to intrude on professional writing programs or WAC/WID programs or even creative writing programs, but to establish sophomore and junior and senior-level composition courses that would allow us to array our vast expertise in ways that do honor and justice to those knowledges and to the students who could use them.

We wanted (and still want) more respect in the academy. In this regard, our collective ethic of service is—for all its rightness and laudability—an enormous liability. It is a signal reason why we continue to be abused in the academy. We thought that rigor (that is, a turn away from art, the personal, the expressive, the affective) would create that respect, and to some degree it has. But if we really want respect, we need to expand our space, not demonize and marginalize divergent ideas and values in our own house (and I am as guilty of this as anyone). How much respect can we command if we allow ourselves to remain a first-year-only enterprise, if we allow ourselves to merely serve the wants and needs of other disciplines? Every other discipline in the university has numerous undergraduate courses arrayed over several years, including our close cousins creative writing and professional writing. It is time, I think, for us to move from the deficit model (“Johnny can’t write!”) that has historically driven our work to a surplus model, one that takes our enormous surplus of expert knowledge and deploys it through a variety of courses over several years.

In this age of shrinking budgets, more testing, and greater “accountability,” you may think we cannot possibly expand our mission and our presence. I think we have to press for expansion precisely because of these pressures. If we do not, I’m afraid we will go further into a siege mentality, turning even more against ourselves. The best defense, so the saying goes, is a good offense. The newly constituted CCC Taskforce on the Multiple Uses of Writing is certainly a step in the right direction, but we will need to take concrete action upon whatever position statement is generated or we will remain right where we are—trying to jam multiple uses of writing into singular courses, trying to pitch our big tent on a postage stamp.

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