

THE PERSONAL CAN BE INTELLECTUAL

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The path to English Literature came upon me suddenly. One day I was inert in my cubicle exercising my licensed social work skills with some reluctance, heart not so soft, mind not so sharp in this 12th career year. I think it was vicarious tragedy that catapulted me into a different direction. I've always loved literature. Reading and writing about it took the edge off of service to bleeding lives, a welcome distraction after a day staunching hemorrhaged dreams. I found myself in undergraduate English classes, giving formal shape to a new direction, careening into the classroom from a side door of my social work career. I sat down hard in the classroom chair, out of breath, eyes wide like a freshman's eyes can be.

But I come to Advanced Expository Writing these twenty years later with a proverbial gentleman looking over my shoulder; we have an ambivalent relationship, the Father and I. This Father, a paternalistic presence (Professor or Doctor or Sir to someone else), looms with a felt sense from my previous professors; vestiges from the movies, an all-knowing, ivy league presence; and the visual composite of that immovable bank of knowledge waiting to fill a naïve and unformed undergraduate brain. To my mind, he is invariably a white man in a white shirt, sloppy tie loose, sleeves rolled up in warm weather. His white hair may be a little "fly away." He has an English accent, wears bi-focals, and is probably in his 60's, the smell of old pages adding a layer of mustiness, crustiness to his authority. He lectures didactically and paternalistically. He is a little gruff in appearance and doesn't encourage class discussion or dialogue after class. The lectures are boring and uninspired. His syllabus is at least a decade old because he's really concentrating on publishing another paper to keep up his academic reputation. His examination questions (and they are called examinations) can generally be answered in one of two ways, right or wrong. If you're on the wrong side, it's an agonizing semester. The papers one writes (we students are part of a lower case *one*) are self-conscious, an attempt at imitating his voice, a reiteration of his lessons. He is bored by his job and has lost the ability to be inspired by youth because he views them as fledglings to be molded by his design. They have nothing to teach him, Father Academia.

In this undergraduate classroom some twenty years later, be still my beating heart, there is a professor talking about creative nonfiction. Our text is *The Fourth Genre*, an anthology of creative nonfiction essays that include personal essays (with much mention of the father of the personal essay, Michel Montaigne), segmented and often non-linear essays of an academic and/or political nature (Rebecca Blevins Faery, Jane Tompkins, Marianna Torgovnick), and powerful prosaic essays that weave together philosophical musings and rich personal experience (Annie

Dillard, Richard Selzer). My professor talks about styles and ideas that demonstrate and analyze experimental, less formal methods of academic writing, and I'm encouraged. It seems, potentially, to be "an inroad, if not indeed an attack, on monumental discourse" as discussed by one of my favorite authors in the anthology, Faery (248-9). This often non-linear intellectual prose seems, for the most part, relegated to college composition classes and practiced by only a select group of published writers (Spigelman). It holds so much potential from this uncomfortable undergraduate seat that I can only believe that it will infiltrate the journals of intellectual purgatory and infuse a little poetry in between the lines of learning.

Our final class assignment is to write something on the process of writing creative nonfiction and perhaps how the genre can be taught. In doing research for this article, I find that the professor had distinct strategies that created a structure meant to induce creativity of thought along with research and the development of rhetorical skills to write out a plausible argument. She blended the theory of expressionist writing, as a warm-up, and moved into a New Rhetorical approach as defined by James Berlin: "Truth [. . . as] dynamic and dialectical, the result of a process involving the interaction of opposing elements" (264). This blended composition focus opened up a train of creativity simultaneous to a track of academic questioning and research on the undergraduate level. As students, some of us developed a stronger voice and gained confidence in our authority in the way we thought about and expressed the facts we researched.

This article, then, is a dissection of the composition theory strategies from a student perspective. The article is meant to be an example of experimental academic writing by a student attempting to enter the scholarly conversation about composition theory. The vantage point is process-oriented and the tense shifts from past to present to convey that reflective process. My intent is to illustrate the argument of Candace Spigelman in that "the telling of stories can actually serve the same purposes as academic writing and that narrative of personal experience can accomplish serious scholarly work. . . . [N]arrative, in its various forms, is a logical and legitimate mode of argument appropriate to the academic writing of both composition scholars and their students" (64). Spigelman chooses not to use a narrative, story-telling approach in her own article. I take her thesis to heart and weave a little pathos into my scholarly endeavors.

The first essay assignment was personal. The authority was placed in our own hands, a strategy straight from Jane Tompkins's article "Pedagogy of the Distressed," in order "to break down the barrier between public discourse and private feeling, between knowledge and experience" (658). This was a good place to start as I could come from a primarily creative place in my writing brain. The essay, "The Awakening," articulated my career transition. It flowed for me like poetry, like a story. I felt free to play with the words around the subjects. I felt free to meander and flashback and incorporate a structure that would let shine the most interesting pieces of my personal history focused on the topic at hand, like a kaleidoscope:

My cubicle walls are a complicated gray. Social Services tried for a joyful touch with purple tile patterns and purple posts, but the gray is vast, the overriding feeling somber.

Call it a mid-life crisis, but now that I have become somewhat accomplished in the field of Social Work, there is an urge to get out, change direction. There is a wall of adult responsibility just about the width and breadth of my cubicle that has closed in on me over the years squeezing out idealism, extinguishing a mysterious rhythm of possibility that pulsed unevenly in younger days.

For some of us the personal narrative was fun and easy. To others in the class, that proved to be a more difficult task as we were encouraged to think and write outside of a traditional essay genre, one that's organized around a thesis with topic sentences to head the paragraphs to prove the thesis, that currently infamous five-paragraph topic paper structure. There were those among us who were lost without it, who didn't agree with the idea of being graded on personal experience, who didn't see the relevance to an academic life of writing about oneself, especially as a student. And there are many academics who would agree with them. Spigelman points out that the personal continues to be blocked in a succession of academic movements: "Thus, while traditionalists in the academy reject personal experience as inherently subjective and 'unscientific,' postmodernists question its representation of subjects as individuals" (69). There is a suspicion of the personal as subjective or lazy or boundaryless. Spigelman argues that a narrative approach with a purpose can be evaluated for its effectiveness in congruity of logic between an illustration and a generalization. Some of us jumped at the chance for a little breathing room. It is only in retrospect that I see a grand plan behind this approach.

Our second essay, a dialogical essay, was a little trickier. The topic was based on the Bakhtinian idea of polyglossia or multiple voices. Bakhtin's concept of the dialogical imagination was to be a prompt for a discussion on all sides of the issue. The professor had the class list out personal experiences that could be viewed as public issues to be researched. There was a free write that followed, and we were sent out to draft a piece that described the experience. I again started with a personal essay style about my own contact with a hate crime against a transgender teen:

I walked from my parked car to work which is next door to the Alameda County Coroners Office. My attention was caught by the two Newark Police Cars parked on either side of the street and a County Coroners van also parked outside of its usual spot. Then I remembered reading about the murder of Eddie Araujo, aka Gwen Araujo. The San Francisco Chronicle reported that Araujo's body was found in a shallow grave in El Dorado County yesterday morning. And here she was. I imagined the bruised and bloody body in a freezer on a steely cold gurney.

As long as I thought of it as a story, I felt freer to go where I wanted to go in my mind and on paper. Father Academia was in another room, in another building, really, and that part

of the essay flowed. Writing from a place of personal authority empowered me to experiment with style and language. I was able to tell a personal story, to see the events and describe them with emotion, with an eye to carving out the more sensational and accessible details for a classroom audience, for we would share these drafts with our classmates.

The second half of the assignment was to research the subject and bring together differing voices on the topic. Integrating other researched voices proved to be more of a challenge than I expected. I found it necessary to work from a place of traditional structure. My choices felt more constricted and my anxiety level was higher. Now, how to integrate the research on those other stories that I couldn't "see" in a form consistent with the first part of the assignment? My storyline initially clashed with the dialogic on hate crimes against transsexuals and centered on religion, mental health professionals, and the news and film media. I cudgeled and kneaded and sang to the material from the storytelling place that I wrote for the first half. I came up with a list, linear, rather soulless, purely quotes to get the viewpoints down. There was a dissonance to both styles. I took myself completely out of one draft. That wasn't at all what I was trying to convey. I so much more preferred the original version that potentially packed a strong emotional punch. I placed some of the quotes and academic musings on the inside of the original "storyline." At first it was awkward, passages sticking out with indelicate incongruence. The storyline too far out this way, too lean that way, too heavy with quotes here, missing key transitions there. Finally I got an acceptable balance of story to facts, almost to my satisfaction. I was able to produce something that was an attempt at integrating the personal with the informational with a little academic thrown in. It proved to be an art to paste together all of those elements. I began the integration like this:

I thought of the evolution of [the transgender] community over the years, my own personal evolution on the topic and back again to thinking about the stiffened and bruised body of Eddie Gwen Araujo on the gurney next door.

There has been an evolution of sorts, a slow move towards a greater acceptance of gender role variation as we usher in the New Millennium. The gatekeepers of 'normality' are loosening the reins after continuous clashes between several titans: a professional mental health community, the newspaper and film media and the religious community.

I continued to mix quotations from various sources alongside descriptive anecdotes so that, ultimately, there was an even balance of ethos, logos, and pathos.

The third assignment was posed as a challenge to the class: to analyze creative nonfiction as a genre by writing a creative and experimental essay; however, the attempts were awkward. I found myself flexing muscles that I have used at differing times in compartmentalized ways. It's different when I write a poem. It's different again when I write a formally structured essay for class. And here was yet another kind of difference, perhaps a most challenging kind for student

and teacher alike. I found that I was writing more for myself, for discovery in this essay medium, but in an academic context. Janet Emig's analysis was proving true: "Writing involves the fullest possible functioning of the brain, which entails the active participation in the process of both the left and the right hemispheres" (10-11). I was relaxed, having fun. I wrote:

The path to English Literature came upon me suddenly. One day I was inert in my cubicle exercising my licensed social work skills with some reluctance, heart not so soft, mind not so sharp in the 12th career year. . . . Reading and writing about it takes the edge off of service to bleeding lives, a welcome distraction after a day staunching hemorrhaged dreams.

Yet the professor loomed large, a more benign presence, this Mother Academia. But I was shell-shocked still. She wasn't "in me" yet, like the Father. Will she like the topic, understand the way I'm constructing it, get the spiraling, sparking logic, the attempt at a little poetic imagery thrown in between? How accurately can the professor evaluate this process if I'm using multiple "skill sets" to come up with a polished structure that houses an *essai* or attempt. I stand somewhere between the personal and academic to get to a thoughtful, well-informed place that is interesting to write and to read.

I went back to the essays that spoke and read to me in interesting ways. I read and reread Faery's three part article, "On the Possibilities of the Essay: A Meditation," analyzing the craft that went into building the form and structure of her essay. The essay itself was on the topic of a metaphorical academic house and the evolution of Faery as a hard won insider who goes through many revolutions to become, again, an outsider, but this time on her own terms. She effectively weaves together her own personal experience of becoming a homeowner as a metaphorical frame to the second segment which writes about The Academic House. The head quote from Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* is structured with two observers: the insider looking at him/herself in a backlit window and the outsider looking into the lighted room. Robinson goes on to say: "*Perhaps all unsheltered people are angry in their hearts, and would like to break the roof, spine, and ribs, and smash the windows and flood the floor and spindle the curtains and bloat the couch.*" I thought about the violent mixed metaphors of house and body—how they are connected to the observer. Robinson's outsider is angry and potentially destructive, setting up a tenor of hostility in Faery's own essay. There is a rage at being silenced and marginalized that heats up the piece from the core of the essay, Part II. Is there also a fear of this energetic rage among academic gate keepers?

But what seems to be a stronger theme in Faery's essay is that of a constructive alternative to what may be a limited approach to academic writing within a network of insiders. Faery suggests that the essay, as a form, is an "'antigenre' [that] has the capacity to work against, even to undo, the presumptions that have structured western discourse" (249). She constructs a theoretic

cal building with poetic, academic, and memoir latticework. The interior part of her essay contains a community of images and ideas borrowed from admired contemporaries and older minds strategically placed inside the dream house structure in Parts I and III. What Faery is dealing with here is a subversive form of writing, “guerilla writing,” as she calls it. She constructs an essay out of “eruptions of personal presence based on shifting experiences and identities, eruptions that aim to dis-compose the power relations that reside in textuality” (249).

The question of authority is central to this theme of “dis-composing” power relations. Faery opens up her essay with a personal anecdote about buying her “dream house,” which happens to be a “grand house, old and possessed of great dignity” (249). The house is traditional, perhaps of the old school in structure, upkeep, and imagination, Faery’s way of staving off change and impermanency. She is, I believe, making an analogy to the traditions of academia that also stave off change and the introduction of new ideas (in this case the use of self). There is a part of her that identifies with traditional academia. There is another part of her that questions the exclusive nature of that tradition. She questions “polite and scholarly forms of writing [as well as] rigidly generic classrooms and hallways of educational institutions” that dominate the academic setting. I can’t help but think about Janet, a college freshman whose writing processes were studied by Ann Penrose and Cheryl Geisler. In “Reading and Writing Without Authority,” Penrose and Geisler examined the differences between Janet and Roger, a graduate student, as the two completed the same research assignment. The college freshman doesn’t seem to have any notion of personal authorship. She views the academic world as an unchanging body of knowledge that is there to be memorized and absorbed and repeated back. Her paper is devoid of any “personal eruptions,” and it is clear that she makes an effort to remove her presence from the page. Her voice is silenced. She also seems to hear one loud voice representative of academia rather than a chorus of voices that might harmonize or jar with an existing harmony. She is an outsider to academic knowledge. Janet parrots a homogenous body and soul of academics that seems to hang on from an outmoded paradigm, that banking concept of education identified by Paulo Freire: the student as repository and echo of the teacher’s truth.

I, too, struggle with an academic a homogenous body that calls for dead things to be regurgitated. In order to learn, in order to stay interested, I’m beginning to write about things relevant to me. I bring in thinkers and writers who inspire me. The Father leans in and whispers his displeasure, he who has provided some useful structure for paper writing over the years. But it is also he who has tampered with my voice, my academic confidence. He and his cronies have built a solid structure that is quite exclusive. There are few accepted insiders to this academic club, and they are reluctant to let their structures expand, perhaps for fear of an impulsive dismantling by the likes of a fourth genre or, heaven forbid, a guerilla writer.

Anxiety immobilizes me in some moments, a useless worry about being wrong (his words). I have to wonder that if personal authority in writing were introduced at an early age, let’s say in elementary school, would a Janet or a Jenifer mouth the words of “Authority” so long and so duti-

fully? The academic house and its inhabitants might get much bigger. That would certainly pose a challenge to the existing teaching methods and approach to the truth of any matter. Faery demonstrates this as she writes herself into Part III. She has moved into a changed place in her values about home ownership as well as authorial ownership: “I grow weary of defending territory to which I’m not sure I can lay just claim. . . . I want this house to be open. . . . Whose home is this anyway? . . . I know, I know, it is in some sense mine. But I can give it up. And surely someday, some way or other, I will” (252). She demonstrates, without a thesis and without being inherently competitive, that the creative, non-fiction essay can be an emergent way to teach and learn. Faery doesn’t leave the reader with any definitive truths. She is still in process, and I, the reader, am still processing her story with kernels of theory wrapped inside the thinking and feeling process itself. When I read an essay like this, I believe in the possibility of revolution in thinking and writing. Just as importantly, when I write essays like this, I write as an emergent insider of a new academic house.

Appendix

California State University, Hayward

English 3020: Advanced Composition: Investigating Form in Nonfiction

Professor Margaret Tomlinson Rustick

Course Description and Objectives

The standard critical essay that has dominated academic writing is a thesis driven argument that assumes a primarily objective stance from a writer who mounts evidence to support his or her position. While there is certainly a place for this kind of writing, in recent years scholars and writers have begun to question the assumptions underlying the traditional critical essay. Throughout this course we will investigate and practice alternative forms of nonfiction writing as we explore the following question:

How do the forms that we use to express ourselves in writing reflect and affect our sense of knowledge, language, and the relationships between readers and writer?

As we pursue this question through a variety of reading, writing, and discussion activities, you will:

1. increase your awareness of how audience and purpose influence writing,
2. participate with your classmates to create a “community” of writers,
3. identify your own strengths and weaknesses as a writer and develop strategies to maximize your abilities,
4. use a variety of methods for exploring, shaping, and communicating ideas.

Essays and Workshops. You will complete three final draft essays, each approximately 5 pages long. While you will have a great deal of freedom in selecting the topics for your essays, by the end of the semester you will have produced (1) a personal narrative/memoir, (2) a commentary on a public issue, and (3) an analysis of creative nonfiction as a genre. In preparation for each of these final draft essays, you will produce 2 preliminary drafts. When a preliminary draft is due, you must bring three copies of the essay to share with your classmates in a writing workshop.

Reading Responses and Facilitation. For each week's assigned readings, you will participate in both in-class and online discussions . . . Designated students will also serve as discussion facilitators [. . . and will] draw on the week's [computer] conversation to comment on 1) the author's apparent/potential "message" or thesis, 2) the relationship the author creates with the audience, 3) how the form or structure of the essay affects the message and relationship with the reader, and 4) any striking aspects about the essay, either in its strengths or challenges it presents.

Portfolio. You must save copies of all written work, including in-class writings, reading responses, essays and written responses to your classmates' work. You will submit selected samples of your work and write a reflective essay in which you discuss insights you have gained about your writing process and development. The selected samples of your work will serve as specific examples to explain and support your self-reflection. Portfolios will be collected at the end of the term for a final grade.

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