11

On Essaying

Background

These are more thoughts prompted by working with teachers in writing. It happened that, at about the same time, the editor of the *National Writing Project Newsletter* and the editor of *fforum,* a newsletter of the English Composition Board at the University of Michigan, asked me to write a piece for them to publish. The occasion for the *fforum* piece was an issue devoted to the work of Jimmy Britton and myself. I wrote the short articles in such a way that they could later be joined back-to-back as a continuous essay on a subject I felt strongly about—the personal nature of all good writing even when content goes well beyond the individual. I had been rereading a lot of classic essays in English letters and appreciating again how well they spoke for us all by speaking so well for themselves.

The first half of what follows appeared as "Confessions of an Ex-College Freshman" in the *NWP Newsletter* of May 1980; the second half was printed in the October 1980 issue of *fforum.* As I hope is evident, I tried to make my own essay an example of what I was trying to say about essaying itself.

I flunked my first theme in college. My composition instructor had said to write on "your home town." O.K., fine, I could choose one of three—where I grew up till adolescence, where I went to high school, or where my parents currently resided, which I knew only in summertime. Today, I naturally see in my lethal choice of number three a fine example of how composition begins with decisions about which raw material to use. But those were pre-prewriting days.

Below the grade of flat E the instructor declared, with terrible justice, "A mass of tourist-guide-propaganda clichés, FW [fine writing], and J [jargon]. Moreover, you really have no exact subject—your title gives you away ['My Home Town']. Quite below college demands." Here was I not only an untested freshman fearful of losing a full scholarship by not attaining a B average, but I was half convinced anyway that I didn't really belong at Harvard and had only got in by way of some back door carelessly left open. Furthermore, I figured to major in English!

Brittle grad-school bachelor that he was, toiling away in one of twenty-odd sections of English A, my teacher really acted charitably. He knew I was on a trolley headed utterly the wrong way, toward endless suffering, and that only a powerful jolt right at the start would derail me so that I could make it in that course and even perhaps in college generally. My first paragraph read:

> Los Angeles, while not exactly the city of angels as its Spanish name proclaims, has within its environs a multitude of entertainments to please natives and tourists alike. Regardless of what his individual tastes may be, deep-sea fishing or listening to a fugue by Handel, there is probably always something which will satisfy his whim.

Over this you can see already a *New Yorker* type of rubric, Themes I Never Finished Reading. But it was a perfect thesis paragraph, for it stated exactly what kind of bullshit the reader was expected to wallow through afterwards. We toured the beaches of Santa Monica, the Hollywood Bowl, where "an open sky of stars lends enchantment to the symphonic works," the nearby desert, where "the moonlight accentuates the unique charm of the quiet expanses," and the downtown L.A. theater district. One topic-sentenced paragraph was on sports, one on food, one on nightclubbing, and so on. No chance of the reader getting lost here. No problems of transition or organization or coherence. The signposts were all there, and the sentences scanned grammatically. But it was atrocious writing. In fact, it wasn't really writing; it was a paste-and-scissors job, only collaged inside the head instead of with physical clippings and splicings. My teacher rejected it out of hand because it was so borrowed and so unreal that he had no way even of assessing it as composition, nothing to come to grips with. It was ghost writing of an unconscious sort, very much like the great majority of papers English teachers waste time marking up.

I wrote that theme as I had written stuff all through school. An all-A student in all subjects through high school, I always did what teachers wanted. The teaching of writing, and of English generally, remains now about the same as then, in the '40s, some exceptions having occurred by dint of strenuous innovation, and many of those having been wiped out by the regressive movement that has prompted publishers to dust off and reissue the English textbooks of that time. Mostly, my classmates and I were asked to write about what we had read to make sure we *had* done the reading and to see if we had got the point. The teaching of writing in this country has for so long been harnessed to the testing of reading that few teachers I meet even today can grasp the enormity of this bias and the consequent mischief and fraudulence.

Whenever I was asked to write about something outside of books, the subject was so remote from me, such as national affairs, that I could know it mostly only secondhand and hence could hardly do anything but para-

phrase the information and arguments that I got from newspapers, radio, and grown-up talk. But that's the point. *My teachers really just wanted familiar, adult-sounding prose.* This they equated with mature writing. They *wanted* phrasing they recognized, views they had heard aired around them, because this meant their students were joining the adult world. Isn't that the whole point of school? They loved and encouraged my five-dollar words, straight out of *Reader's Digest* vocabulary quizzes, because big words show learning and correlate with intelligence. They were nice people who didn't know much about composition as such at all. They too had never written anything besides the usual school and college testing stuff—book reports, term papers, and essay exams—and so they had never learned how to shape material not predigested for them by others. Anyway, a glittering travelog on a glossy town seemed O.K. to me.

After that first failure I got the point quickly. (No doubt I was also relieved to know that the institution I was going to spend the next four years at wasn't going to deal in that kind of bullshit.) My instructor advised me to do the assignment over—and knock it off this time. I did and got an A. Great, a happy ending, but what was the difference? Well, it was all the difference in the world, and yet I was pretty much the same person I had been the week before. I didn't know any more about organization or sentence structure, I didn't have a better vocabulary, and I hadn't acquired any new "writing skills." Nor was I a more logical thinker.

For my second chance I chose to tell about "My Boyhood in Jackson," a significant decision because that town really meant something to me. I told how my friends and I played out our adventure fantasies against the Mississippi background as Twain's characters had done in Missouri. In the dense foliage along the Pearl River we pretended to be buccaneers, explorers, and Stanley looking for Livingston. Or:

> I was a scientist—the sole survivor of an expedition sent up the Amazon on an important quest. After I staggered from the jungle into the clearing, my feverish body fell lifeless before those waiting for me. In my outstretched hand lay a small vial containing the juice of a rare plant—the cure for cancer.

I told how we dug niches for thrones in the steep white clay banks of the railroad cut, using tie spikes for tools, and lit discarded flares to stake out our thrones with. Then the train roared through the cut.

> The surging power of the locomotive was mine, for I felt it pass through me as the earth rumbled under the passing train. Besides, the engineer gave it to me by the friendly waving of his hand.

I concluded unpretentiously that although I might well have play-acted some of the same things had I lived somewhere else, the fact is that "I played and grew in Jackson, and that is what endears it to me."

In a way I was being myself in the first theme too: the glamor of Los Angeles and the emptiness masquerading as impersonality were true for me to the degree that I was attracted to the one and had learned to put on the other. So the difference between the themes was really in the level of the self. I just suddenly changed my whole orientation toward writing. My teacher had said, in effect, "No one wants to read what he knows already or could come out with himself. We read for something new. Write what only *you* know, or what you have put together for yourself. *Make* something, don't just *take* something." I had no problem with that. We all live on all planes of shallowness and depth all the time and so can shift planes at any moment if someone or something sets us straight. I thought, "Oh, I see. *That*'s how it is. Writing isn't what I've been led to believe. It's saying what you really think and feel or what you really want to put over." But, of course, I had known that before from reading great writers and from trying to write extracurricular stories. It was *curricular* writing I had a false notion of. And this dissociation of writing from reality afflicts most students in this country.

The main reasons for this are two. Traditional schooling has shown no respect for writing, exploiting composition instruction as a way to service its testing system and as a way to spawn the pencil-pushers required to stock all those clerical jobs in industry and government, where you do not want thinkers. You just want people who have passed minimal standards—can read just well enough to follow directions and write just well enough to take dictation. But I'm not talking about some conspiracy by *them.* All of us share through our culture and bear within us a deader, less evolved aspect of being that calcifies because it is still mineral or vegetates because it is still plant-like or preys because it is still animal, all while the human aspect of the self works toward its partly divined divinity. This sludgier element of individuals settles out in society as sedimentary attitudes and institutions that mire down efforts to better ourselves.

The other reason for the shallow tradition that has neutered the teaching of writing is that teachers themselves have practiced writing so little that they fall back on hopelessly irrelevant procedures. Many simply don't know how real writing takes place. It is patent to anyone who has worked much with teachers that the less practice they have had, the more they rationalize book reports, formal grammatical analysis, paragraph formulas, sentence exercises, vocabulary quizzes, and a prescriptive/proscriptive methodology. "You have to *teach* them," they say, never having learned how themselves. Compelled once to coach a sport I had never played, lacrosse, I too gravitated toward a simplistic rules–results approach that was an effort to distill experience I had never had.

The National Writing Project has succeeded and gained support precisely because it makes teachers practitioners instead of mere preachers.

When I am teaching teachers to write in summer institutes, I see the same thing happen to them that happened to me with that first freshman theme. They discover that if they write from the heart they not only have something to say, something that interests others, but that they can better order their thoughts and can actualize their latent talent. It is more than ordinarily moving to see *teachers* discover how writing really occurs, often after many years of frustrating themselves and their students. Maybe I identify with late bloomers, but I'm especially touched by the delicate transition from recalcitrance to confidence that takes place as they find out just how well they and their partners can, after all, write.

Before they have made this discovery, many teachers will call every kind of writing that is not term-paper or essay-question stuff "personal" or "creative" writing (the two terms being interchangeable) and hence put it in a big bag that goes up on the shelf. Priority goes, of course, to "exposition," which is equated with "essay," which is equated in turn with forced writing on given topics from books, lectures, or "current issues." In these institutes with teachers I break a class into trios in which members help each other for several weeks to develop subjects and techniques by hearing or reading partners' writing ideas at various stages of working up the material. Some of this material is gleaned from memory, some is information obtained fresh by interviewing or observing, and some is feeling, thought, or imagination elicited suddenly by a stimulus such as a tune or other in-class presentation. The material may take the form of stories, dialogues, essays, or songs and poems. It soon becomes obvious that ideas stem from all kinds of material and take all kinds of forms and that the very limited sort of exposition used for testing enjoys no monopoly on intellectual activity; participants can see, often with astonishment, how loaded with ideas is this rich variety of writing they have produced.

When schools narrow the notion of *essay* to fit it to testing, they are violating the whole tradition of the genre from its very inception to the present. College composition instructors and anthologists of essays have doted for years on George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," which they hold up to students as a model of essay or "expository writing." Please look closely at it even if you think you know it well; if a student had written it, it would be called "personal writing," that is, soft and nonintellectual. Orwell narrated in first person how as a British civil servant in Burma he was intimidated by villagers into shooting an elephant against his will. But so effectively does he say *what happens* by telling *what happened* that the force of his theme—about the individual's moral choice whether or not to conform to the group—leaves us with the *impression* that the memoir is "expository," that is, chiefly cast in the present tense of generalization and in third person. What we really want to help youngsters learn is how to express ideas of universal value in a personal voice. Fables, parables, poems and songs, fiction, and memoir may convey ideas as well

as or better than editorials and critiques. Orwell does indeed provide a fine model, but teachers should not let prejudice fool them into misunderstanding the actual kind of discourse in which he wrote that and other excellent essays, for this leads to a terribly confusing double standard whereby we ask students to emulate a great writer but to do it in another form.

Orwell wrote deep in a tradition of English letters honoring the essay as a candid blend of personal and universal. It was resurrected if not invented during the Renaissance by Montaigne, who coined the term *essai* from *essayer,* to attempt. From his position of philosophical skepticism ("What do I know?") he saw his writing as personal attempts to discover truth, what he thought and what could be thought, in exactly the same sense that Donald Murray or Janet Emig or I might speak of writing as discovery. From Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Browne's *Urn Burial;* Addison's and Steele's *Spectator* articles; through the essays of Swift, Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey to those of Orwell, Virginia Woolf, Joan Didion, and Norman Mailer, English literature has maintained a marvelous tradition, fusing personal experience, private vision, and downright eccentricity with intellectual vigor and verbal objectification. In color, depth, and stylistic orginality it rivals some of our best poetry. Look again at Hazlitt's "The Fight" (and compare it with Mailer's reportage of the Ali-Frazier fight in *King of the Hill*) or "On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth" or "On Familiar Style"; De Quincey's "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater" or "On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth," which begins, "From my boyish days I had always felt a great perplexity on one point in *Macbeth*"; or Lamb's "The Two Races of Men," "Poor Relations," "Sanity of True Genius." Consider, too, a book like Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams* for its simultaneous treatment of personal and national or historical.

Some essayists, like Montaigne and Emerson, tend toward generality, as reflected in titles like "Friendship" or "Self-Reliance," but tone and source are personal, and we cannot doubt the clear kinship between essays featuring memoir or eyewitness reportage and those of generality, for the same writers do both, sometimes in a single essay, sometimes in separate pieces; and Lamb and Thoreau stand in the same relation to Montaigne and Emerson as fable to moral or parable to proverb. The difference lies not in the fundamental approach, which is in any case personal, but in the degree of explicitness of the theme. "I bear within me the exemplar of the human condition," said Montaigne. Descending deep enough within, the essayist links up personal with universal, self with Self.

These essayists frequently write about their reading, and they love reading. They set, in fact, a model for writing about reading that is very different from writing-as-testing, because *they* have selected what to read

according to their own ongoing pursuits, and, second, they cite ideas and instances from books *in mixture with* ideas and instances drawn from everyday experience, thus fusing life with literature. Many openly framed assignments that I have long advocated will elicit from students exactly the kinds of essays that constitute our fine heritage in this flexible form. They call for the writer to crystallize memories, capture places, "write a narrative of any sort that makes a general point applying beyond the particular material," "put together three or four incidents drawn from life or reading that all seem to show the same thing, that are connected in your mind by some idea," or "make a general statement about something you have observed to be true, illustrating by referring to events and situations you know of or have read of." The point is to *leave subject matter to the writer, including reading selections.* Any student who has done such assignments will be better able, strictly as a bonus, to cough up some prose to show he has done his homework than if he has been especially trained to write about reading.[1]

Schools mistreat writing because the society suffers at the moment from drastic misunderstandings about the nature of knowledge. Applying "scientific" criteria that would be unacceptable to most real scientists making the breakthroughs out there on the frontier, many people have come to think that subtracting the self makes for objectivity and validity. But depersonalization is not impartiality. It is, quite literally, madness. Einstein said, "The observer is the essence of the situation." It is not by abandoning the self but by developing it that we achieve impartiality and validity. The deeper we go *consciously* into ourselves, the better chance we have of reaching universality, as Montaigne knew so well. Transpersonal, not impersonal. It is an undeterred faith in this that makes a great writer cultivate his individuality until we feel he utters us better than we do ourselves. Teachers should be the first to understand this misunderstanding and to start undoing it, so that schooling in general and writing in particular can offset rather than reinforce the problem.

Here are two examples of what we're up against—one from a famous current encyclopedia and one from a leading publisher, typical and telling symptoms. Most English majors probably have sampled or at least heard of Sir Thomas Browne, a very individualistic seventeenth-century master of an original prose style, a writer's writer much admired by successors. Of his *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* Funk and Wagnalls's *Standard Reference Encyclopedia* says, "Its unscientific approach and odd assemblage of obscure facts typify his haphazard erudition," and then concludes the entry: "Despite Browne's deficiencies as a thinker, his style entitles him to high rank among the masters of English prose." What this verdict tells me is that

[1]For these and other recommended writing assignments, see James Moffett, *Active Voice: A Writing Program Across the Curriculum*, Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1981.

the scholar who wrote that entry felt overwhelmed by all the books Browne had read that he had not and that our scholar knew far less than he should have about the enormously important and complex networks of thought and knowledge, called esoteric, that after several millenia of evolution still had great influence on Newton, Bacon, and Descartes (who displayed at times equally "irrational" intellectual behavior). Such a judgment on such a writer is nothing but smart-ass chauvinism; permitted to poison basic information sources, it makes "science" as deadly a censor as ever the Church was during its Inquisition.

We can avoid producing Brownes from our school system by having all youngsters read and write the same things—a goal we have closely approximated—and then their approach will not be unscientific, their assemblage odd, their facts obscure, or their erudition haphazard. And we will have ensured that no one will be able to emulate the great essayists we hold up as models (or even read them with any comprehension). Real essaying cannot thrive without cultivation of the individual. Who would have any reason to read anyone else? (And I want to know how Browne's style could be worth so much if he was not a good thinker.)

The second example is personal. When I received back from the publisher the edited manuscript of the original edition of *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K–13,* I was aghast. "My" editor had rewritten sentences throughout the whole book to eliminate first-person references and other elements of the author's presence and voice. This included altering diction and sentence structure at times to get a more anonymous or distanced effect. Faced with the appalling labor of restoring all those sentences, I called up the editor, furious. She said righteously, "But we always do that—it's policy." It never occurred to her to exempt, or even to warn, an author who wouldn't be publishing the book in the first place if he weren't regarded as some kind of expert in writing.

You can't trust your encyclopedia, your publisher, your school administration. And you can't trust yourself until you learn to spot how you too may be spreading the plague, as Camus calls it. The double standard about "Look at the greats, but don't do what they did" naturally goes along with our era of Scientific Inquisition, which is really technocratic plague. Teachers stand in a fine position to spread infection. If you let yourself be convinced that "personal" or "creative" writing is merely narcissistic, self-indulgent, and weak-minded, then you have just removed your own first person.