WE'VE DONE IT AGAIN: TAKING THE FUN OUT OF READING NON-FICTION

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Before the review there must be repentence. All the things we love—photography (Alison Shaw), film (John Sayles), music (Kate and Anna McGarrigle)—are loved on conditions: *secrecy*: nobody else, or only a few others, can know about them; *sensitivity*: only those of us who appreciate the subtlety of their achievement can qualify as lovers; and *silence*: all of us understand that we can not talk about them, or that if we do, we must use simple words to avoid turning our passion into pedantry. The last one is always the toughie because once we meet a fellow admirer we want to share our wonder. But we know the dangers: academic recognition, critical exegesis, theoretical debate. Loose lips sink ships.

In the early 70s, Tom Wolfe started the rumors about nonfiction. But despite his hoopla about "new journalism," most nonfiction remained hidden where it had always been, right out in the open—splashed on the pages of the Sunday Style Section, twisting through the ads in *The New Yorker*, stacked next to the self-help books in Walden's. We were pleased that Wolfe knew what was going on, but equally pleased that no one took him seriously. In the mid-80s, Bob Atwan started another round of rumors by editing an annual collection of "Best Essays." The volumes created a kind of Oscar ambivalence: we were pleased

when our favorites were chosen, puzzled when they were overlooked, and provoked that everyone (including us) saw the process as significant.

Because Wolfe and Atwan were working outside the academy, we hoped nonfiction would continue to escape the critical gaze. But we failed to consider our complicity in two movements working at the extremes of the academic hierarchy, movements that managed to take most of the fun out of reading nonfiction.

At the bottom, we slugged along in comp. 100 looking for creative ways to connect the teaching of writing with the process of composing. The yearly clutter of textbooks revealed the achievements of nonfiction writers, and suggested that these semi-famous authors had something important to say about the planning, drafting and revising of expository prose. So we classified their rhetorical purposes, interrogated their stylistic strategies, and solicited testimony about their work habits. Some of them, startled by the sudden attention, began to talk. Soon every new textbook featured both an essay and the writer's confession about how it was created. The secret was out, the magic was gone, but the worst was yet to come.

From the top, we were seduced by contemporary theory's speculation about "textuality," the notion that virtually everything is a text, a coded system of signs subject to deep but indeterminate "readings." Such speculation identified nonfiction as an ideal specimen for semiotic experiments. After all, these texts were not embedded in the traditional matrix of cultural encodings. They were marginal texts, created at the boundary between fact and fiction. And because theory encouraged us to contest that boundary, we turned away from belle lettres and unloaded on nonfiction. Our sensitivity slipped into parody as we babbled on about the discourse practices we had discovered at these uncanonized sites. We had done it again. We-a culpa.

Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, Pedagogy, Chris Anderson tells us, began innocently enough. In 1986, a few of the boys decided to go public about their secret passion during a panel discussion at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in New Orleans. The panel became—in poststructuralist lingo—a "project," and they began to "position" themselves with respect to previous studies of nonfiction (Kinneavy, Winterowd, Larson, Fort) and to prevailing notions of composition/critical theory (Booth, Burke, Perelman, Weaver/Bakhtin, Derrida, Fish,

Kristeva). The result is "problematized" by the nouns slammed together on the spine.

To be fair, Anderson is up front about the difficulties lurking in his title:

> The word *literary* masks all kinds of ideological concerns, all kinds of values, and is finally more a way of looking at a text . . . than an inherent property of a text. The problem with *nonfiction* is that it's a negative term for something positive, implying that somehow nonfiction is less than fiction. More importantly, . . . it's difficult to tell the differences between the fictive and the nonfictive, since we can never apprehend reality without bias. (ix)

The difficulties continue as Anderson first subdivides nonfiction into *essays* (reflective) and *new journalism* (informative)—acknowledging that some writers fall into one category, while others crossover into both—and then reconstructs his binary opposition by asserting that while there is certainly a category called nonfiction, "the kind of writing that concerns us here is literary in some way, however that is defined" (x).

The nouns after the colon create more confusion. The assumptions of composition and contemporary theory weave in and out of most of the essays in the collection, but *theory* as asserted by the title is redefined as "Generalizations and Definitions" and repositioned in the middle section of the book. The first section, renamed "Readings," contains essays that approach "a particular nonfiction author from the standpoint of a particular critical methodology" (x). And the third section, although its title, "Implications for Pedagogy," retains its original purpose, *includes* two of the volume's most engaging theoretical and critical contributions: John Clifford's "The Reader's Text: Responding to Loren Eisely's 'The Running Man' " and John Schilb's "Deconstucting Didion: Poststructuralist Rhetorical Theory in the Composition Class."

Such quibbling is ultimately pointless. Anderson explains that the "hybird nature of our material and our inquiry" (x) encourages the provocative interpenetration of categories. Appropriately, "Readings" opens with Charles I. Schuster's analysis of Richard Selzer. Drawing heavily upon Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of "the dialogic imagination," Schuster demonstrates that Selzer's "work won't settle down comfortably into one genre or category. Not only from book to book or essay to essay, but even within individual

phrases and clauses Selzer's language, at its best, continually interacts with other languages, literary languages, scientific languages, humanistic languages—and with the entire social, ethical and philosophical constructs which surround those languages" (23-4).

If any language can connect with any other language, then probably none of the critical-textual pairings in "Readings" should surprise us. But we are certainly ruffled when Dennis Rygiel rolls out the language of stylistics to assess the language of E.B. White's "Once More to the Lake" and "The Ring of Time." As he counts specific features of diction and syntax, his calculations all but erase our memory of White's grace:

> The greater simplicity and directness of 'Once More' compared to 'Ring' is related, in part, to . . . the relative high frequency of monosyllables and Native words; the greater clustering of sentence lengths, the smaller average length of clauses and T-units; the smaller amount of free modifiers. . . . (47).

A more profitable pairing appears in Suzanne Clark's feminist reading of the "speaker" in Annie Dillard. Clark is particularly interested in tracing Dillard's "painful sacrifice of self involved in the pursuit of knowing" (111). In the male tradition, nature writers speak as experts, explorers, conquerors. Dillard's speaker, by contrast, seems "unknowing, passive, overwhelmed, consumed" (118). Clark uses Julia Kristeva's depiction of such sacrificial postures as "neither subject nor object [but] . . . *abject*" (114) to illuminate Dillard's sense of perception as receptivity, of poetics as that which "shapes not the seen but the seer" (122).

Clark's analysis exposes the marginal position of women in Anderson's book. Only two of the seventeen essays are written by women (Clark on Dillard, and Phyllis Frus on Stephen Crane), and only five of the nonfiction authors subjected to critical interpretation are women (Didion, Dillard, Ehrlich, Kingston, and Woolf). This latter deficiency is especially evident in the first essay in "Generalizations and Definitions," Carl H. Klaus's historical survey of "self-reflexive statements" by essayists on the nature of the essay. From his catalogue of some forty essayists, Klaus cites only two women: Katherine Fullerton Gerould and Elizabeth Hardwick. Klaus might contend that, like many of the other "theorists" in this section, he is concerned with the problem of genre, not gender. But since he focuses on the conflicts between personal

and factual orientation, organic and formal structure, and private and public personas—conflicts that have attracted considerable commentary by women writers—he cannot beg off so easily. Nor, for that matter, can Anderson and the rest of the scholars in this collection beg off their failure to focus on one Afro-American writer—male or female.

But there we go again, complaining that someone has failed to contribute a psychoanalytic reading of Alice Walker or a receptionist study of Richard Rodriquez, when what we want is to protect the writers we love from some dunce's drone. Or failing that, we want a commentator whose writing is as engaging as the nonfiction that prompts it.

Peter Elbow's "The Pleasures of Voice in the Literary Essay" comes close—no doubt because he neglects the critical hairsplitting about ethos, implied author and persona (217n), and embraces "what some would call a 'naive psychological realism': implying that we live in a world of distinct selves; that we are able to know something of each other through language; that language or behavior can fit the self well or not so well; and that we can sometimes hear the difference as we listen for authentic voice or its absence" (229). Elbow is, of course, "playing dumb" about the controversial history of "voice" because he believes that "listening Toms" can ask useful questions about three kinds of voices: "1) *audible voice*: how much do we *hear* the text as we read it? 2) *dramatic voice*: what kind of speaker or writer is implied in the text (and how vividly)? 3) *one's own voice*: what is the relation of the text to the actual writer?" (212). Elbow's examples are drawn primarily from Erhlich and Selzer, but he extends his analysis to student texts, thus pointing toward the final section of the book.

Aside from using new theories to approach nonfiction writers in the classroom, the major "implications for pedagogy" center on the teacher and student as writers. Jim Corder tells us what he learned writing (as opposed to writing *about*) nonfiction. His struggle to complete or escape the assignments he gives his students helps him formulate "suggestions about writing in a language somewhat homelier than that of some textbooks and, homelier, more descriptive of what I thought I saw happening as I tried to write" (311). His suggestions are not new ("Let readers know where you're going as soon as you know") or striking ("Some subjects are just right, but others have to be made right"), but they hit

home because they come from a teacher who writes personal essays rather than deliberative discourse (312).

Chris Anderson tells us how these two forms get scrambled on the other side of the desk. In a sophomore term paper writing course, he assigns Lewis Thomas "in the hope that some of his clarity and conciseness as a writer of sentences might rub off on my students as they wrote their term papers. And then there was the richness of Thomas's writing as a source of ideas for students to pursue in their research" (315). But the reading proves subversive: Thomas's assertions that research must proceed from error, that writing works better without planning, and that images are more compelling than statistics rattle those students looking for a simple blueprint. When Anderson offers them the option of writing the exploratory essay illustrated by Thomas or the "relentlessly flat" referential article modeled in their textbook, he is not surprised to see them run for cover. Unlike Corder, who encourages us to write "to know ourselves and show ourselves to each other," Anderson's students prefer to hide behind a list of sources, to attack their subject with the official discourse of their discipline.

So what does all this mean? The question forms and reforms behind our eyes as we scowl at the large crowd gathered for the final session in a complex series of sessions on nonfiction at the 1990 meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Chicago. All of us have read *Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, Pedagogy*; all of us subscribe to its claims about the writing we love; some of us have even written essays in the volume. Yet we are uneasy. Over the last few days there has been altogether too much nonsense about nonfiction. On the dais for this final session are several critics and two writers, Richard Selzer and Greta Erhlich. Maybe it's the furniture, maybe it's their size, but the writers seem smaller than the commentators who are fielding questions about "the inherent contingency of the genre." Selzer and Erhlich don't say much, but when they do their responses are brief and evasive. They are probably wondering what we are wondering—what does all this mean? More importantly, how did we get talked into doing this? Are academics always so serious about the things they love? Do they always have to prove their love by one-upping each other's criticism? Do they always hide behind the twists and turns of some theory? Haven't they or their students learned anything from reading what we've written?

Instead of answers, an anecdote. In the early 70s, W. H. Auden made a tour through the midwest. At each stop, he read a few poems and submitted to questions. He enjoyed the reading at our university, but became increasingly vexed as the questions thickened and gelled. Several of us accompanied him to the airport, hoping to redeem ourselves and our colleagues from the evening's numskullery. He was not amused. Academic recognition was demeaning and deadening. He glared down the road, fuming, "I'm never, never, never going to do this again." The admirers in the car, eager to demonstrate our sensitivity, promised, "We won't either." He turned toward us with a sardonic smile and a long, unsettling stare that we hoped didn't mean what we suspected it meant. But it did, because he turned his eyes back toward the road and sighed, "Yes, you will."

Joseph Trimmer, Professor of English at Ball State University, believes in the value of academic discourse. On occasion, nevertheless, he feels as if he's had enough. He was in such a mood when he wrote this essay. At other times he can be just as annoyingly theoretical as anyone else.