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# Exploring Problems With “Personal Writing” and “Expressivism”

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## Exploring Problems With “Personal Writing” and “Expressivism”

--UNPUBLISHED DRAFT--

Peter Elbow

[I submitted this essay some time in 2002 for the special issue of *College English* on the theme of The Personal in Academic Writing that finally appeared in September 2003. After some promising response it was turned down and I've never gotten around to revising or resubmitting somewhere, but it continues to feel like a useful train of thought to me.]

When discussion about something goes round and round without resolution, it's often a sign that the key term has too many unexplored and ambiguous meanings. I think this is the problem with the two terms I explore here, “personal writing” and “expressivism.” I seek to reduce some confusion and controversy in the field of composition by clarifying these terms.

I want this essay to embody my commitment to *both* the personal and the nonpersonal stance in writing. Neither must be sneered at. (I argue this point in my Foreward to the special issue of *PRE/TEXT* devoted to “personal expressive writing that does the work of academic discourse.”) In the first section of my essay, I'll engage in fairly nonpersonal analysis of “personal writing.” In the second section, I'll use a more personal mode to explore “expressivism.”

### I. Personal Writing

In “Linguistic Utopias,” Mary Louise Pratt argues that our thinking about language is skewed if we assume a world where people are mostly clumped into single language zones. The norm, she says, is a world of linguistic “contact zones” where different languages mix and overlap. Her argument applies here too: I'll try to show that mixtures of the personal and the nonpersonal--hybridity, to use a currently fashionable word--are common and often experienced as normal.

In fact there are four different *dimensions* of the personal that can be present in various combinations in any piece of writing. The *topic* can be personal or not; the *thinking* can be personal or not; the *language* can be personal or not; and the *function* or goal of the writing can be personal or not. These dimensions can occur in any combination. Thus there is not a single thing, personal writing, that we can neatly contrast with its opposite. We have additional evidence of this confusion in the fact that there is no clear opposite to personal writing: academic? professional? public?

objective? I'll use the term "nonpersonal" here, but it is a rubbery token for a large ambiguous realm.

### **The Topic Can Be Personal or Not**

A personal topic might be "My Experiences With Alcohol"; or "My Experiences with Revising." These contrast with nonpersonal topics like, "Drinking by Faculty in the Academy" or "The Revising Practices of First Year Students." Essays on these nonpersonal topics might never treat the writer or her experience at all. Of course there are marginal overlapping cases--where, for example, the writer partly treats the impersonal topic and partly treats the personal topic. This kind of hybrid has become a recognizable genre in first year writing courses: teachers have discovered that students often do a better job with "academic research"--say on weight loss or steroids--if the writer uses the paper also to explore his or her own personal experiences in the area. It's as though academics are gradually learning this genre from students. Jane Hindman, in "Making Writing Matter," writes of the personal topic of her own drinking in an essay that's also about the impersonal topic of human discourse and agency. Nancy Sommers, in "Between the Drafts," writes of the personal topic of her own revising in an essay that's also about revising in general. Sometimes it's hard to draw a line between personal and not. Keith Gilyard takes both the personal and nonpersonal as his topic in his *Voices of the Self*. Journalists sometimes treat a large issue by giving equal emphasis to the nonpersonal and the personal.

### **Thinking Can be Personal or Not**

What is *personal thinking*? A strict constructionist might call it a contradiction in terms, but common parlance applies the term to a broad range of ways that people reach a conclusion by intuitive or associative or "gut" routes--steps of inference not bound by clear rules of reasoning. Andrea Lunsford speaks of how writing can make "a space for intuition, emotion, and the body in writing and in the construction of knowledge--what Kenneth Burke calls the paralogical, to go along with the logical [but that] the logical has had a stranglehold on the teaching of writing" (24).

Let me point to examples of *personal thinking as applied to nonpersonal topics*--since that will best illustrate my theme that the personal and nonpersonal often intertwine. Sommers doesn't just describe her own revising, she uses her feelings to help her think about the nonpersonal topic of revising. Hindman also thinks with her experience--noticing one feeling and then probing and waiting to find another feeling underneath it--in order to wrestle with the very abstract nonpersonal issue of the degree to which the self is constructed by discourse. Fontaine and Hunter's *Writing Ourselves into the Story* is one of various collections of essays that use personal experience for thinking about academic topics in composition.

The essays I've cited would seem to suggest that personal thinking about nonpersonal topics is something relatively recent in our field. But really there's nothing new here; what's new is the calling attention to it. For example, literary criticism from the beginning has relied on feelings and intuitions about texts--for example about the tone of a passage or the inexplicit reverberatory implications of an unusual metaphor. This kind of thinking is not bound by rules of reasoning; it depends on the attempt to attune one's sensibility and explore and articulate one's most fugitive feelings. Psychologists, therapists, and social workers are trained to pay heed to feelings and hunches even when they can't find clear evidence or reasons for them. Mina Shaughnessy praised Richard Hoggart and James Baldwin for their skill in using autobiography to do intellectual work (cited by Bartholomae in his "The Study of Error"). Even though strict constructionists would deny the label "thinking" to this kind of thinking, they tend nevertheless in the same breath to call it the rule rather than the exception in human mental functioning. Surely most human thinking has always been personal; some of it has always found its way into careful scholarship. What's different about recent developments is that many scholars now want to call attention to it and honor it as thinking rather than leaving it in the background or even hiding it.

It's worth looking further at this loose category, "personal thinking," to differentiate more clearly some of its modes. I'll point to four:

(1) *Using narrative or story telling to think about nonpersonal topics.* Jerome Bruner made his reputation and pretty much defined the field of cognitive psychology by defining thinking or

cognition as the abstract process of forming mental categories. But late in his career he wrote a notable and influential book, *Actual Minds*, arguing that narrative thinking is just as central to *all* human thinking. In our field we love narrative that is rich in detail. (Interestingly, when teachers complain about student personal essays as “too impersonal,” they are usually complaining about a narrative that lacks detail.) Yet plenty of narrative is *not* rich in detailed experience, and we can still think with it—that is, with narratives like myths, legends, fables, folk tales, and fairy stories. It’s been the contribution of anthropologists like Levi Strauss to show how myths are examples of vigorous thinking about large nonpersonal issues. Journalists also often use bare boned stories to throw light on nonpersonal topics.

(2) *Using feelings, intuitions, hunches, personal associations and analogies to think about nonpersonal topics.* Harriet Malinowitz, in “David and Me,” explores the difference between her experience of David Bartholomae on the page in the library and her experience of him sitting there in the audience as she reads a conference paper dealing with him. She brilliantly uses these subtle (yet not uncommon) feelings in order to make a crucial distinction between “reader” and “audience” and to show how physical presence can make us think more deeply about conventional pieties about the reader-as-always-a-fiction/persona/construct.

But again, there’s nothing new here. Montaigne celebrated and enacted this kind of intuitional personal thinking over and over, even when his topic was nonpersonal (for example in, “Of the Inconsistency of our Actions”). Many have argued that the essay itself is a genre with an inherent link to informal personal thinking. Much poetry can accurately be described as personal, intuitional, associative thinking applied to nonpersonal topics (for example, Wallace Stevens’ “The Idea of Order at Key West”).

Peter Medawar, Nobel prize winner in biology, wrote importantly about the difference between the associational and intuitive thinking that scientists use to *work out* their hypotheses versus the more nonpersonal or detached thinking with which they *publish* their conclusions. In the decades since Medawar wrote, many scientists have made the same point, and more than a few have shared the kind of personal, intuitional thinking they applied to nonpersonal scientific problems (for

example, Lewis Thomas in his essays and Watson and Crick in *The Double Helix*). Here is a classic example from science: “One night in 1865 Kekule dreamed of the benzene molecule as a snake biting its tail while in whirling motion. From that vision his concept of the six-carbon benzene ring was born, and the facts of organic chemistry known up to that time fell into place” (Kekule 749).

(3) *Imagining the experience of others in order to think about a nonpersonal topic.* What could be more personal and not subject to explicit rules of reason than the act of trying to imagine someone else’s experience or feelings--using empathy, role-playing, the believing game? We do it all the time in order to think not just about personal topics but also nonpersonal ones. Academic writers use this kind of thinking whenever they make inferences about the experience of characters in literature or history, the experience of writers writing, and the experience of students in our classrooms. Lad Tobin is notable for his explorations of students’ feelings in order to reach general nonpersonal conclusions about pedagogy.

Turning away from our field, William Safire often analyzes or argues some nonpersonal issue of foreign policy or domestic politics with a column that is nothing but the stream of consciousness thinking of some public figure. All we get are the thoughts of, say, Saddam Hussein thinking to himself about his own needs and feelings and how he can outwit the stupid American policy. Some columns are dialogues, for example between a public figure and his advisers or between competing advisers giving different advice to the president.

(4) *Using someone else’s actual personal experience in order to think about an impersonal topic.* What makes ethnography or qualitative research a disciplined field is the attempt to use the *actual* experience of others by carefully collecting their actual words. When ethnography is about peoples’ personal experience it is an example using of personal thinking in order to throw light on nonpersonal topics. In addition, countless magazine essays and journalistic feature stories about large nonpersonal topics make heavy use of personal interviews that render personal experiences. It’s interesting to note that in much journalism and in the more positivist tradition of ethnography, not only is the topic nonpersonal, but the authors strain to remove any trace of their own personal experience--all the while engaged thinking with someone else’s personal experience.

\* \* \*

*Nonpersonal Thinking.* By nonpersonal thinking I simply mean thinking that is “disciplined” because it follows explicit public rules and hence is repeatable from one person to the next. Deduction is the clearest case, but most people would say that careful induction is also nonpersonal thinking if both the evidence and the steps of inference are kept explicit and public. This is the standard that *most* scholarship aspires to. Another prime instance of what most people think of as nonpersonal thinking is the careful use public data and published sources (“Don’t just make things up, go to the library and research!” is the traditional teacher mantra).

Let’s look again at the mixing of personal and nonpersonal in the same text--so in this case it’s *nonpersonal thinking applied to personal topics*. It’s not hard to find. Many writers describe and analyze their own experience or behavior in an impersonal or objective way--sometimes in a detached clinical way. Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy that sets itself exactly this agenda. Consider the spate of recent autobiographies in English studies--for example by two recent presidents of College Composition and Communication, Keith Gilyard and Victor Villanueva, and two recent presidents of the Modern Language Association, Alice Kaplan and Edward Said. These books might be thought of as personal and they certainly contain personal thinking, but obviously there is plenty of nonpersonal thinking there. For example, Villanueva thinks and analyzes the history of classical rhetoric in order to apply it to quite personal experiences; similarly, Gilyard analyzes issues of literacy, language, and African American English to throw light on his personal experience. (He emphasizes his mixing of personal and nonpersonal by means of his collage-like alternation chapters by genre.) Whenever writers make careful deductions or inductions and use carefully gathered data about their personal experience--also sometimes using material from the library or other research or scholarly sources--they are using nonpersonal thinking about a personal topic.

T. S. Eliot famously remarked that true art is impersonal. He was arguing that when art works well, the personal is burned away. He was calling on the tradition from Schopenhauer: “Art liberates and purifies, and its tokens are those short moments when we look at a beautiful landscape forgetting about ourselves, when everything that concerns us disappears, is dissolved, and it does not

matter whether the eye that looks is that of a beggar or a king” (quoted in Scammel 37). Deborah Brandt, writing in the 2001 *College English* symposium on personal writing, insisted that her goal for the personal words she gets from her ethnographic subjects is “to empty them of their personal significance” (44).

All this mixing calls into question the common marginal complaint by teachers to “personal essays”: “Why is your essay so impersonal here?” Just as common is the complaint on “academic essays”: “Too personal here.” It’s hard to argue that there’s any law against mixing itself. Teachers will have to think more carefully to figure out whether *this particular mixing* is ineffective or not in this particular essay.

### **Language Too Can Be Personal or Not**

What is personal language? We usually call language personal if it is in an informal register and uses colloquial forms or slang. There’s an implied metaphor here of physical closeness and presence that seems inevitable (a “metaphor we live by”). When someone gets very close it feels personal. What’s closest and most present is most personal--a hug or embrace. Distance and absence feel more impersonal or formal. Colloquial language sounds like speech, and speech gives us more sense of the writer’s physical presence sitting next to us--more intimate and therefore more personal. When teachers or academic journals ban contractions, it’s surely because they sound more like someone talking. A word like *talky* feels more personal than *colloquial*; *figure out* than *conclude*. The first person “I” calls attention to the presence of the writer as an individual and presumably this explains the ritual prohibition against it in many situations--especially in science (APA guidelines to the contrary notwithstanding). “We” somewhat dilutes the stain of first person. The second person “you” calls attention to the *reader* as a person, and even that seems to be enough to get itself experienced as too personal for academic writing.<sup>1</sup>

Let’s look at the two obvious mixings of the personal and impersonal.

*Personal language used for nonpersonal topics.* The most obvious site is in the freewriting, rough exploratory writing, and informal correspondence of writers working on wholly nonpersonal



scholarly topics. The mixing was most striking to me when I taught at M.I.T. I kept hearing and occasionally reading very personal, colloquial, and slangy language for the high abstractions of mathematics and science. Sometime this language is used for rigorous disciplined nonpersonal thinking--and sometimes for intuitive thinking steered mostly by feelings. Email has increased the amount of personal language written about nonpersonal topics and sometimes nonpersonal thinking.

But do we find personal language in *published* writing about nonpersonal topics? If we think historically about the literate culture at large--newspapers, magazines, and nonfiction for a wide audience--we can notice an obvious long time drift towards more informal, personal registers in published writing. These often get experienced as violations of "proper standards for writing." Popular nonfiction has come to use more and more personal registers--even about nonpersonal topics. Literary nonfiction in particular (for example in nature writing) often uses some of the more linguistically personal resources of fiction.

For a striking example of published personal language applied to a nonpersonal topic, consider this passage from a serious recent column in a magazine that's always been fastidious about language, *The New Yorker*:

. . . There is nothing wrong with cars, TV sets, and running shoes. What's wrong is the waste--chemicals, heavy metals, CO2--that's produced when we make them, use them, and, eventually, throw them away. Eliminate that waste, and you eliminate the problem.

Right, and why not cure cancer while you're at it? Last time we checked, waste--landfills, smog, river sludge--was the price we paid for a healthy economy. (Surowiecki. From a column headed "Financial Page" with subtitle "Waste Away.")

William Safire often argues for linguistic propriety in his *New York Times* language columns, so it's striking to see how much personal language he uses in those very columns--conversational, casual, first person, sometimes slangy:

Although I am quite able to set this word out of my mind as I write this column, let me *prattle* awhile [jumping then into a parenthesis of impersonal scholarly etymology] (from the Low German *pratten*, “to pout,” and then “to prate, babble, talk idly”).

He likes sudden swerves into the personal, especially in asides, and clearly *celebrates* the clash of registers. The next paragraph starts off, “In the age of multiculturalism and interdisciplinarianism (there’s a new one), most of the nonscientific uses of the term have been pejorative.” He starts another section of the same column by writing a one-sentence paragraph as follows: “You pay for good linguistic lawyering, you get it.” And he ends the section with yet a shorter paragraph: “I spell it *tchotchki*. Do I need a lawyer?”

But how about in the academy? Do we find a similar growth of personal language used for nonpersonal topics? Obviously there is plenty of it in student essays, despite teachers efforts to curb it. (Most students will end up writing outside the academy where the personal registers are more welcomed). But how about published essays and books by academics themselves on nonpersonal topics? The answer is not clear, but still I end up surprised.

On the one hand, most people in our field would probably guess that the larger trend in the whole culture of literacy towards written language that is more informal and personal would be reflected in the pages of our journals. And probably careful investigation could find evidence for this. Yet on the other hand, I suspect an interesting argument could be mounted for movement in the other direction. Essays from the early days of *College Composition and Communication* tend to use a more personal register than what we’ve seen since the field has worked harder at professionalism. (Think about some of the essays by people like Edward Corbett and James Corder--very scholarly figures who nevertheless pulled their chair up closer to readers and talked more directly to them.) Also, older scholarship in literary studies tends to reflect that British tradition of scholarly writing that is slightly talkier and more informal. But perhaps it’s not a change in time but a contrast between scholarly traditions. What I called the “British tradition” is a tradition in literary criticism. Philological scholarship on both sides of the Atlantic has tended to follow the more formal nonpersonal Germanic tradition in language.

Academics are somewhat more likely to use some personal language on academic topics in certain less common genre situations. For example, when academics publish what was a speech, more informal colloquial personal language is a bit more likely (though I've often been asked to remove such language when I've had a talk accepted for publication). Rosemary Deen's language was more informal in her 1992 *College English* essay about teaching where she used the genre of informal letter or memo ("Notes to Stella"). Essays for a student audience sometimes use more personal language. Yet oddly enough, it can work the other way too. Martha Kolln is willing to write more personally to other academics than to students: she talks personally about an anecdote from her life when she addresses other teachers in the instructor's manual of her *Rhetorical Grammar* (15)--but doesn't permit herself this kind of discourse to students in the book itself. I thought I could make an argument that academics use more informal language in the introductions to books than in the books themselves--and this must be generally true (as when conference speakers start their presentation by looking directly at the audience and speaking personally--but then look down and read a text with very little personal register). Yet as I browsed my shelves looking for striking examples, I couldn't really find enough to make that argument. (Of course there are personal bits in dedications, but here *topic* is personal).

I end up, then--especially in light of the larger trend in literacy towards increased informality--that academics themselves *don't* use much personal language for nonpersonal topics. But then this is not surprising. "Academic discourse" may be almost impossible to define, but no one doubts that personal language doesn't belong there. The case becomes clearer, I think, in the next section.

*Nonpersonal language used for personal topics.* I turn now to the opposite form of mixing or hybridity. The most blatant example of nonpersonal language used for personal topics is illustrated when professionals like psychiatrists, psychologists, or doctors write professionally about very personal issues like sexuality or divorce--albeit other people's personal issues. Even though the larger goal of such scholarship is to build insights about impersonal topics of human functioning, nevertheless in particular case studies, the topic or focus is often very much the personal story. Yet their own language will usually be in the rubber-gloved, nonpersonal register of their discipline. (I

remember walking along with a doctor friend: at one point we both smelled the same thing, but he turned to me and said completely naturally, “fecal matter.”)

Let me consider academic writing closer to home. Imagine looking carefully at all the prose in that growing tide of personal self-disclosing autobiographies written by academics in English and composition studies. Of course some of the language is strikingly informal and personal, but as I looked through much of it, I was struck with how much of it is not. In fact I’d guess that most of it is *not* particularly colloquial, informal, nor rich with the particular flavor of that person. We often don’t notice that the language isn’t personal when the topic or content is blatantly self disclosing. But most people are far more conservative about language than about ideas or content, and the language habits of academics are often especially strong. Training in academic discourse goes deep. And copy editors are likely to weed out whatever locutions in a personal or informal register remain in the writer’s final draft.

Perhaps this seems a counter-intuitive claim, so I’ll try to give some examples. Jane Hindman’s essay is experimental in form (using three different type faces for three different voices) and deeply confessional about personal matters that few are willing to put in print--yet not much of the language itself is particularly personal; most of it is either standard edited English or even quite academic. I see only three exceptions--three short italicized paragraphs of inner speech dropped in at different points where we hear a language, voice, or register that seems distinctly personal. Mary Louise Buley-Meissner speaks of a different writer’s personal essay where “The word *I* appears twenty-nine times in thirty-four sentences, yet the self written into her text is voiceless, anonymous” (52).

Looking more closely, consider the language in Jane Tompkins’ intensely personal book, *A Life in School*. Of course it contains some notably personal language. Her chapter, “Reverie” is a three page *tour de force* of poetic language that seems to me distinctive and strongly personal. There are other passages that are more directly or obviously personal. For example (addressing the reader directly):

So what do you think? Should I have told the students more? held forth?  
given them more to hold onto? (172)

Similarly:

To begin at the beginning, I didn't want to get up in the morning.

*Who does? What's the big deal?*

Look, *I'm* telling this, not you. It was important that I didn't want to get up,  
because the reason was, I was afraid of school. (8)

But most of the language in her book strikes me as not particularly personal. The passage I just quoted goes on like this: "Most mornings I was pulled from sleep by my father, whose kind presence shielded me, temporarily, from what I knew I had to face" (9). This is strong, clean, effective writing, but surely not very personal (note the somewhat distant locution: "whose kind presence shielded me, temporarily"). Even fairly formal usages are common: "Of my long, intimate relation to Melville my students knew nothing" (172) Her "Postcard From the Edge" chapter is very personal in *genre* (what genre is more personal than a postcard?), but when I look at the language itself in those postcards, not so much of it seems in fact personal. I don't at all intend this as criticism. Her clear, graceful, unadorned style stays unobtrusive and works well to transmit the impact of the intensely personal things she's saying or describing. But again I come back to my theme of mixing: nonpersonal language for personal topics is extremely common in the self disclosing writing of academics and other professionals, and it is part of what fuels my interest in complicating the concept of "personal writing."

### **What Can We Learn From this Analysis of Personal Writing?**

I've explored three dimensions of writing--topic, thinking, and language--in order to show the complex ways the personal and nonpersonal dimensions are so often mixed. I'll briefly mention a fourth dimension, the function of writing, in which mixing can occur. Writing that takes the self as topic can seem personal or not so personal in its *function*. That is, writing about the self can serve the personal goal of rendering or expressing or describing the self; the not so personal goal of figuring

out some issue or topic that is different from the self; or even the *very* personal goal of venting, catharsis, or self-display. If I write about my feelings, people may well disagree about the function: was I just trying to convey something of my experience? or figure something out? or trying to get the feelings off my chest or even be exhibitionist about it. So much depends on differences in what readers assume is appropriate. I'd guess that it's just this kind of subjective reader-response disagreement that lies behind different valuations of Jane Tompkins' autobiography. Such differences of reaction are all the more likely because it's seldom an either/or matter: the same text can serve multiple functions (as James Kinneavey emphasized almost unavailingly in his study of the modes of discourse). Even though these judgments are subjective, they have a big effect on overall reactions and on attitudes towards personal writing. Surely some of the resistance to writing about the self in an academic context comes from feelings that such writing is inherently an act of mere self-display--fine for popular autobiography but not for academic work. Sensitivity to function, by the way, reminds us that pieces of completely nonpersonal academic writing can sometime seem to be functioning as an act of self-display too--"Look at how impressive I am."

We can train ourselves and our students to avoid oversimple assumptions about whether writing is personal or not, by looking more closely at the complex ways that the personal dimension intersects the topic, thinking, language, or function of a text. It would help to be able to control these differences as writers--not only for rhetorical ends but for more pleasure in writing.

Of course there are many college assignments for which we don't want students to use *any* personal language and thinking at all. But teachers (and not just teachers of writing) need to keep in mind how often good writers in the world bring to bear personal language and personal thinking on nonpersonal topics--and that most of our students will do virtually all of their future writing outside the academy. (A number of business genres, however, are notable for strenuously resisting personal language.) Anne Herrington draws one of the crucial morals for this issue (in her analysis of the central role of personal experience and personal thinking in Linda Brodkey's "Writing on the Bias"): "Failing to recognize the presence of rendering [of personal experience] in some academic writing--

including writing within Composition Studies--contributes to dismissing its value in undergraduate writing" (233).

## II. Personal Thinking about "Expressivism"

"Ideas derive from the lives and needs of people" (4), writes Richard Ohmann. Yes. And (surprise!) I have a personal stake in Part I of this essay--though that's not the only force driving it. But I disagree with how Ohmann finishes his sentence: "and attempts to deny this connection are at best futile and at worst deceptive" (4). I defend my decision to more or less deny--at least disguise--my stake in the argument of Part I. Even though I defend personal writing and celebrate voice in writing--and argue that it's natural and fine for readers to listen for the voice and the person in a text--I nevertheless insist that no one has an *obligation* to reveal more than they want of themselves. One of the great values of writing is that it permits us to hide or disguise our voice more easily than we can usually manage in speech. So I seek in Part I to get readers to assess my analysis on its own merits--apart from how they might "place" me or my other writings. An argument can be good or bad apart from who makes it or what reasons the writer has for making it (Wayne Booth makes this point with eloquence and learning). Writing makes even literal anonymity possible--which in turn makes it possible for people to be heard who would not otherwise have been listened to.

But as I turn now to Part II to consider "expressivism," my personal stake is more central and I need to foreground it. My topic is personal too, myself, although I'm also treating the nonpersonal topic of composition's history as a field.

The concepts of *expressivism* and *expressionism* have been taken up into the very wallpaper of the House of Composition. The assumption is virtually universal that there was a group of people who somehow constituted a movement or school for which expressivism is the right label. They were teachers and theorists who saw the main function of writing as the expression of self and whose premise was that "Truth is conceived as the result of a private vision" (Berlin 71). I am often seen

as central in this “school”; Victor Villanueva’s recent linking of expressivism, the autobiographical essay, and me is typical (“The Personal” 52).

But I don’t recognize myself in this picture of our field’s history--nor the pictures of the other main conspirators like Macrorie, Britton, and Murray. I won’t try to make a careful case here (some have done so, for example, Sherrie Gradin). But I think I can show how my complicated commitment to the personal dimensions in writing might have led to this misreading.

After *Writing Without Teachers* came out in 1973 I began to get a trickle of letters from strangers addressed to me with great familiarity--often mentioning that they felt they knew me. I didn’t mind, indeed I felt kind of touched, but it’s always seemed a little curious--especially now in the light of the all the recent self disclosure by academics. For I didn’t reveal much about me in *Writing Without Teachers* (nor later in *Writing With Power*). Yes, I was at pains to reveal that my interest and relationship to writing grew out of my difficulties and struggle and even failure. But I told very little of what actually happened--nor virtually anything about my life. The *topic* of my writing was squarely nonpersonal: I was trying to analyze of the process of writing and then derive advice for how to manage one’s own writing better. True, the analysis was based on my own experience, and I started by acknowledging that I was making generalizations based on a sample of one. But even to the small degree that my experience shows, it was always a means to a nonpersonal end--generalizations of wider import. (Of course it was easier in 1973 to qualify as a flaming show off than it is now.)

What interested me most (and still does) is *thinking*. Though I wouldn’t have said it this way at the time, what I most wanted to do in those early books--besides trying to tell people about the writing process--was to show the *texture of my thinking*. I wanted to show that we don’t have to sound distant and impersonal when we talk about nonpersonal or academic matters. And I had a rhetorical end too: I wanted to reach out to readers and try to make contact. I don’t think it is a “me, me, me” book, but it is sort of “you, you, you.”

We see here how important it is to distinguish between personal topics and personal thinking and language. Because my *thinking* and *language* were so personal, some readers felt they knew me.



And why not? Even if we don't know anything at all about someone, we might be said to "know them" if we know the texture of their thinking and sensibility.

So where does this concept of "expressivism" come from? For one thing, I wrote with personal thinking and at least a certain amount of language that counts as personal--and this means that I let myself "show"--even though the topic was not myself. But more important, probably, was the fact that I defended and promoted all three modes of personal writing--even writing about the self. I was fighting the idea that any of the dimensions of personal writing were less useful, sophisticated, intelligent, or even less learned than, say, academic writing.

What seems to have gotten lost, though, was the fact that I was not at all saying that the personal dimensions of writing are any better or more important than the nonpersonal kinds. I probably got in a few disparaging phrases about *stuffy* writing, but that's not the same as saying that the personal is better than the nonpersonal. One might say that I simply wasn't clear enough--no doubt true; but it strikes me now, in fact, that I was rather timid and conservative in those two books about the genres I kept imagining myself trying to help readers write. My characteristic examples of writing tasks tended to be rather schoolish--for example, to describe or analyze the causes of a historical event.<sup>2</sup>

It seems, however, that my *foregrounding* of personal modes of writing managed to blind theorists hungry to build categories to the fact that personal modes or dimensions were never the *goal* of my analysis or suggestions; they were a *means to an end*, namely to help readers with *all kinds* of writing, even very nonpersonal kinds (like analyzing the causes of the French Revolution).

Why foreground personal kinds of writing if the goal is to help with all kinds? I'd hoped the answer was obvious. Personal modes of writing help writers *take more authority over their writing*: not to feel so intimidated by it and not to write so much tangled or uninvested prose or mechanical or empty thinking. The various dimensions of personal writing seemed then and still seem to me the most powerful tools for getting authority over writing and thinking in general:

--When we invite personal *topics*, we invite people to write about events or experiences that they know better than any reader--even the teacher reader--and therefore have more authority about.

--When we invite personal *thinking*, we invite people to develop ideas by following their own personal and idiosyncratic thought processes--use hunches and metaphorical, associational, emotional thinking. Most people can produce richer and more interesting ideas this way than by trying to conform to disciplined thinking untainted by personal biases and emotions. Disciplined thinking comes afterwards during revising.

--When we invite personal *language*, we invite people to write by using whatever words come most comfortably to tongue--instead of always pausing, erasing, changing and worrying that they've probably used the wrong word. Of course I made it clear that one eventually had to turn around and criticize and change many of one's freely written words ("taking a razor to one's own flesh" was one way I put it), but that critical process didn't need to interfere with a happy and self-confident process of generating words and ideas.<sup>3</sup>

In this second half of the essay, then, my point is that "expressivism" is a seriously misleading word. It has led countless people to skewed and oversimplified assumptions about a period and a group of people--for I think that what I'm saying here goes for Macrorie, Britton, and Murray too. Yes, in a *certain sense* we wanted to promote writing that "expresses the self"--but it's deeply misleading to say this unless you distinguish between what's going on at the levels of topic, thinking, language, and function. That is, I celebrated and continue to celebrate personal *language* and *thinking* (which do express the self of the writer), but the term *expressivism* has been sold and widely bought as a picture of me and a whole school of others preaching that students should always take the self as the *topic* of their writing and not consult any standard of truth but what they find inside.

I can't remember that I (or Macrorie, Britton, or Murray) ever used the word "expressive" for our goal or approach in teaching writing. Of course Britton pointed out that "expressive *language*"

shouldn't be neglected in school over "transactional" and "poetic" language; Kinneavey spoke of "expressive *discourse*" as one of four kinds. Neither ever conceived of a *teacher* or *method* as "expressive" or "expressivist." As far as I can tell, the term "expressivist" was coined and used only by people who wanted a word for people they disapproved of and wanted to discredit.

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Summing up the two parts of this essay, I see the two terms, "personal writing" and "expressivism," suffering from different problems. "Personal writing," as a single term, tempts one to assume a single entity corresponding to it--instead of recognizing how the personal and the nonpersonal are often mixed across four dimensions. But once these complexities are more widely recognized--once people are more careful to notice how texts can be *felt* as predominantly personal despite some nonpersonal dimensions--or *felt* as nonpersonal despite some personal dimensions--we can probably learn to use the term "personal writing" all by itself on the fly. When arguments emerge, we'll have to tools to look more closely at the complex dimensions.<sup>4</sup>

I'm afraid that "expressivism" is hopelessly infected by narrow and usually pejorative connotations. I don't see any way to use the term validly. Historians of composition need to find more accurate ways of describing the views of the people it was pinned on. I'm not a historian, but I don't see what's wrong with the term "process." We were all newly preoccupied with exploring what goes on when people write and eager to help people become more *consciously strategic* in managing themselves. I think we all had a new and heightened interest in invention, particularly in helping people take more authority over themselves as writers by writing more *from* the self--but not necessarily *about* the self.

### End Notes

1. Here are some examples of changes by academic copy editors to my MSS accepted for publication. Notice the efforts to make language less informal and personal.

--“When I dropped out of graduate school” becomes “when I interrupted my graduate study”;

--“not complete agreement, mind you,” becomes “not complete agreement, of course”;

--“readers give grades” becomes “readers award grades.”

Notice two cases where the copy editor makes only small subtle changes in order to avoid the taint of speech:

--“is not a measure of how texts are valued by actual readers in natural settings” becomes “is a measure not of how texts are valued in natural settings by actual readers”;

--“we can avoid the simplifications of ranking and use judgment instead” becomes “we can avoid the simplifications of ranking and instead use judgment.”

2. Of course I did make recurrent nods to people wanting to write poems and stories. I remember revising times when I'd say, “Oh yes, I'd better say a word about poetry or fiction here.” Readers who were poets and fiction writers could surely see that I wasn't one of them--just as a reader wrote to say that my “cooking” metaphor seemed fruitful but she could tell that I wasn't a cook. More than one reader--as well as an editor at Oxford--complained that *Writing Without Teachers* was too academic or school-based and that the main problem I was trying to solve was *my* problem, namely, how to write for teachers.

3. There are two good ways people can use the various personal dimensions of writing to increase their authority over a nonpersonal task or assignment. (a) If they can choose their own topic--but must produce a nonpersonal essay--they can start off with whatever *personal* topic tugs at them (perhaps an argument with someone they are close to), and use personal thinking and language to explore and think about it. Even if the result is nothing but vented feelings, the writing will invariably reveal larger nonpersonal issues or concepts that are connected to it (for example, How does the topic of the fight relate to larger public issues? Gender roles? Money? What is interesting about the dynamics of the fight?) They can then choose the most interesting issue and work out

ideas for a nonpersonal essay about it. (b) But if they have no choice about the topic or problem (perhaps a teacher has assigned a particular issue or text to analyze), they can start off with personal thinking and personal language about it to develop good insights--and then massage these insights into nonpersonal or even academic writing. In both cases, the nonpersonal thinking and language will be energized from underneath by invested thinking and language.

I've recently worked out an exercise I think is particularly useful for showing students how to take a piece of rough careless freewriting (personal thinking and writing) through two intriguing steps. First, simply remove all mistakes in spelling and grammar. The result is a piece of writing that is *100% "correct!"* Second, remove all obviously personal elements by changing all uses of first or second person and reframing all particularized personal experiences into impersonal formulations about "people" or "it once happened" and this sort of thing. Now the piece is not only correct but *formal*. Of course I don't claim that this playful exercise will produce good writing. But it shows students two important things. First, they can produce writing that is correct and formal without having to start off *trying* to write correctly or formally. Second, the correct, formal writing they end up with can still have *voice, energy, and liveliness*--even though all the careless, informal, and personal elements have been stripped away (see *A Community of Writers*, Mini-workshop C).

4. This is the shape of the analysis and argument I made at length about the term *voice*. It too breeds argument partly because it has four or five very different meanings. But once we more generally understand these different senses and carry them around implicitly but consciously, we'll often be able to use the term without stopping to make careful distinctions. (See my "Introduction.")

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