

CHAPTER 1: MEETING THE REAL SELF IN THE ESSAY

Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy: for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
Is full of blessings. Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk.

—William Wordsworth

The essay is habitually talked about in terms of its relationship to its writer. Teachers of the essay, for instance, often tell students that the essay is a space for self-discovery and for self-exploration. For example, in “Suddenly Sexy,” Wendy Bishop argues that this is at least one major reason why composition teachers should incorporate creative nonfiction (the umbrella genre under which the personal essay is now housed) into their classrooms. This incorporation, she believes, would help “encourage students *to meet themselves in their writing*” (273, emphasis added). In the creative nonfiction courses that I’ve taught for more than a decade, I find that writing students, in turn, are consistently enthused about writing essays for precisely this possibility. In particular, they appreciate having the opportunity to practice using the conventions of the genre that are supposed to enable the possibility of meeting themselves in writing: the use of the first-person singular in such a way that the “I” refers specifically to them (not to a fictive or constructed narrator); and the use of their own experiences to explore a topic that is personally meaningful to and chosen by them. If they use these conventions effectively, then they consequently should find out more

about who they are, as they discover what they think, believe, and feel in the processes of essaying and of examining the shaping text.

On the one hand, I must admit that it is very likely that my students are enthusiastic about the self-focused requirements of the essay simply because of the course's place within our curriculum. In other words, many students have confessed to me that they like the genre because by the time they take the course, they are so used to writing arguments and literary analyses, they are excited to write something, anything, new. On the other hand, as Lynn Z. Bloom argues in "Living to Tell the Tale," their enthusiasm could also be attributed to the fact that people want to talk about themselves—about who they are, what they think, what they feel, and what experiences they've had. As one of my prior students aptly put it, "Everybody's most interested in her own self because it's through the 'I' that we live."

I believe, though, that the appeal of the personal essay may also and, perhaps, primarily be due to its celebration of a simpler notion of the self and that self's relation to the world—a notion that is not as complicated as our postmodern conceptions of the self, of reality, and of the relations between them. These postmodern notions of the self, we are intimately aware of, if we work in the humanities. They inevitably inform how we teach literature and writing. These "postmodern notions" are, in fact, part of the very atmosphere of the academy. I'm thinking, for example, of Lester Faigley's decisive work, *Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition* (1992), in which Faigley considers, at great length, the fragmentary, the contradictory, and the consuming subject; I'm thinking, too, of Susan Miller's *Rescuing the Subject* (1989) in which Miller theorizes the postmodern subject as one who "both originates with, and results from, a written text" (15).

Today, it seems that discussion about the postmodern subject has focused its attention onto, and its tenor in response to, what we might call the materialistic and narcissistic subject (e.g., I'm thinking of the agonized and/or frustrated reflections I see weekly in professional listserves on the changing student demographic—a demographic accused of being more interested in making money and having fun, in their iPhones and Instagram accounts, in selfies and statuses, than in an education that gets them the academy's promised pay-off of social consciousness and cultural critique). No doubt, this is part of the reason behind writing teachers' suspicions about the genre of the personal essay: they worry that it not only perpetuates an overly simplistic concept of the subject but that, in so doing, the genre also risks encouraging the consumer-mentality and narcissism so many educators find at least disconcerting, if not deplorable, in today's college students. To put it simply, if students believe who they are is equal to

what they like and buy, then the essay may become little more than an exercise in affirming that belief.

To be clear, I believe that these suspicions or worries about the essay are born of the assumption that the essay is necessarily a space into which the subjectivity of the writer—the real-world referent of the text’s “I”—is expressed and examined. According to this assumption, the essay serves as one space where writers can take a long, hard look at *how* they look, how they see themselves and the world: through what narratives, what tendencies, what beliefs, what values, what experiences. In short, it is in the essay that one can see clearly his/her own subjectivity. However, the whole exercise stops at looking/seeing. There is nothing in the conventions of the personal essay that requires anything more than that. There’s nothing in them that requires students to challenge (or change) what and/or how they see.

In sum, assumptions about the genre and, in particular, about the writer-page relation in the genre can prove problematic. Consequently, this chapter examines the more generic conception of the relation between the writer and the page in the personal essay. To get at that relation, I examine three major conventions of the genre: freedom, walking, and voice, which circulate in examples of scholarship about the genre. In examining these three conventions, I find that they enable and, in turn, are enabled by a particular conception of subjectivity. In this mutually enabling relation, I find a compelling, seductive, but also contradictory and intensely problematic theory of the personal essay.

A significant portion of this examination will focus on one of the three conventions—voice. Voice in writing is a concept that most writing teachers are familiar with, and most would acknowledge that the concept seems to be rooted in a romantic notion of the writer-page relationship. Though such a relationship between the flesh-and-blood writer and the textual self may seem antiquated, if not downright dangerous, to many of us teaching writing in the academy, that conception of the relationship has not gone away, and in fact, it still holds powerful sway over writers and readers of essays—practitioners, scholars, teachers, and students alike. Too, it is still powerfully present in Rhetoric and Composition, no matter how much we think we’ve moved on to the interest/bent we like to call “social constructionism.” In fact, because of their mutual interest in voice, essayists and voice-invested compositionists explain the relationship between the writer and his/her text in significantly similar ways. To trace that similarity and use it to conduct a textured analysis of voice, the last half of this chapter will move away from essayists’ articulations of that relationship and focus at length on compositionists’ articulations of the processes of “meeting the self in writing.”

FREEDOM

Of the primary convention of the essay, voice, essayist Scott Russell Sanders states in “The Singular First Person”:

We make assumptions about that speaking voice [in an essay], assumptions we cannot make about the narrators in fiction. Only a sophomore is permitted to ask if Huckleberry Finn ever had any children; but even literary sophisticates wonder in print about Thoreau’s love life, Montaigne’s domestic arrangements, De Quincey’s opium habit, Virginia Woolf’s depression. (194)

I point to this quote to demonstrate that there is a problem with the premise driving common conceptions of the relation between essay and essayist that I’ll trace out here. The problem is that in order for Sanders’s argument to work, first one must buy the premise that the essay is the expression of the writer’s self. Only then would one be permitted to ask questions about the essayist, like those listed by Sanders. As to where that premise might come from, I will speculate a bit below, but for now, it’s worth noting that said premise would not even be possible without the first convention of the genre: freedom. As essay scholar Michael Hall says in “The Emergence of the Essay and the Idea of Discovery,” the personal essay is free from “the constraints of established authority and traditional rhetorical forms” (78), e.g., the constraints of a whole literary tradition that the writer must speak to and within. As such, it can be and do other things. It can be, for example, the embodiment of the essayist.

Of course, the interesting irony here is that there are, in fact, conventions of the essay—qualities that make an essay recognizable as such. The most important of those conventions is also the one that is most inherently contradictory: the essay’s freedom from the conventions of a literary tradition. The essay is not supposed to be about conventions, about the great essayists, the great literary movements, and the great sociopolitical concerns that came before (or that emerged during) the essayist’s foray into essaying. Rather, the essay is a form without tradition. To explain, in another ironic move (ironic because it argues for the essay’s freedom from tradition by historicizing it), Michael Hall argues that the essay came about in response to the huge shifts in thinking that emerged just prior to and during the Renaissance—shifts that emphasized and celebrated the exploration of unconstrained possibilities.

Freedom is important to the work of the essay because it makes possible something other than participation in the confining conventions of a literary tradition. Instead, according to Sanders, “an essay is [...] about the way a mind

moves, the links and leaps and jigs of thought” (192). He goes on to explain that in this movement, the mind (which he equates to a dog hunting in “the underbrush of thought”) “scatters a bunch of rabbits that go bounding off in all directions.” The essayist must then chase a few of these metaphorical rabbits and avoid “plodding along in a straight line” (192). This requirement of chasing the jiggling and jaggling lines of thought is bound up in what Sanders argues, after Emerson, is the essayist’s job: to “fasten words again to visible things” (Emerson 88 and Sanders 191), including, it seems, the essay to the essayist, or more specifically, the essay to the essayist’s mind.⁴

Essayists working from this premise take their cue from a conception of a mind-essence relation that is more than 2000 years old (or at least, they take it from a particular reading of that conception). In Georg Lukács’s influential chapter on the essay in *Soul and Form*, he points out that in a free form (the essay), “an intellect ... believes itself to be sovereign” (2). Without constraints, without the parameters imposed by a more rigid genre, the mind does as it will. In that freedom, it is likely to work according to its own tendencies, its own habits, according to its own logic. And if it is working according to its own tendencies, habits, and logic, then it is free to see the writer’s essential, unmediated self (what Lukács refers to as the “soul”).

To explain this, Lukács invokes Plato’s argument that “only the soul’s guide, the mind, can behold it” (5).⁵ To clarify this relation between the mind and soul a bit further, I point to the supposition here that not only are the mind and soul separate, but that the mind’s purpose is to know and to guide the soul. What’s interesting in this articulation of purpose is that while one could easily reason that in this statement, Plato is actually arguing that “the *rational* mind” should rein in the impulses of the more passionate (and impulsive) parts of the self, essayists use the claim to argue that where the mind is freed from any obligation to the boundaries of convention, the soul is better or more truthfully revealed. To explain this through Sanders’s metaphor, if the essayist’s mind is like a hunting dog chasing thoughts, then the key to the essay is in granting that mind plenty of freedom to chase whatever thoughts it likes wherever it likes. What will emerge in the course of this run over open land, so to speak, is a soul that is finally free to emerge as it truly is—without the constraints of social mores, without the expectations imposed on us according to our gender, ethnicity, class, etc., and without, it seems, even the confines of rationality (a socially-sanctioned way of thinking).

WALKING

Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, to find that the next major convention of the essay concerns the chase itself—i.e., how one chases what thoughts one wants to

chase and, consequently, reveals the unmediated, unconstrained self. That *how* is understood as being like a journey into nature, which traditionally involves a long, meandering, contemplative walk in the woods.⁶ In short, the walk in nature serves as a metaphor for essaying, and there's a long tradition of essayists using this metaphor in their essays to reveal both the nature of the essay and the nature of the essayist's self. Essayists typically describe the self-realizing/self-remembering process that they underwent in their latest visit to the woods (or to the mountains or to some other remote expanse of nature); in turn, via the description of the distillation of the natural self, the essay comes to embody that self.⁷

For example, in the anthologized essay, "An Entrance to the Woods," Wendell Berry explicitly invokes the metaphor of walking and simultaneously enacts that movement on the page. He writes of walking through the woods and shedding "all the superfluities" of his life. For Berry, this shedding or "stripping," as he calls it, is made possible only in "the absence of human society." He states, "The necessities of foot travel in this steep country have stripped away all superfluities. I simply could not enter into this place and assume its quiet with all the belongings of a family man, property holder, etc. For the time, I am reduced to my irreducible self" (677). By walking through the woods without the cumbers of all his worldly obligations and through the subsequent effects of that walking (i.e., the quieting and the reducing of the obligations of the worldly self), Berry discovers his natural self, what he calls his "irreducible self."

This discovery happens not only in the process of walking-in-the-woods but in the process of walking-on-the-page, and Berry points to this play. Note the tense he uses as he states, "Slowly my mind and my nerves have slowed to a walk. The quiet of the woods has ceased to be something that I observe; now it is something that I am a part of" (678). He writes as though he is walking in the woods at this moment. And, he notes that by walking in nature (and now in the essay), he no longer simply observes the quiet of the woods; he becomes a part of it. I would suggest, then, that for Berry, discovering the irreducible self involves a return to what he is a part of naturally—nature—while moving away from what is not "natural"—society. This movement, he does not simply describe but enacts in the essay, not only because of the verb tense he uses, but because the essay lingers in and wanders through the issue [of discovering his natural/irreducible self]. The return to the natural self via the movement of the essay seems most important to the work of the essay because through this return, the natural self—the self that is buried/diluted when integrated with society—emerges.

In another famous example of discovering the natural self through the freeing experience of walking in nature, William Hazlitt is able to shed the superfluities or "impediments," as he calls them, of life in his essay, "On Going a Journey."

Hazlitt states, “The soul of a journey is liberty, perfect liberty, to think, feel, do, just as one pleases. We go a journey chiefly to be free of all impediments and of all inconveniences; to leave ourselves behind, much more to get rid of others” (181). Again, Hazlitt is freed in journeying, not only in the described real-world journey, but in the journey enacted in the essay, because the essay provides him with the singularly unimpeded and open space that he only otherwise finds in walking/journeying alone in nature. He states, “I want to see my vague notions float like the down of the thistle before the breeze, and not to have them entangled in the briars and thorns of controversy. For once, I like to have it all my own way; and this is impossible unless you are alone [...]” (182). Similar to Sanders’s metaphor of a dog chasing rabbits, Hazlitt is describing the meandering, seemingly haphazard movement of his mind (“my vague notions float like the down of the thistle before the breeze”), freed from social constraint/obligation (“not to have them entangled in the briars and thorns of controversy”), bound only by his own desires/impulses (“all my own way”).

Of course, Hazlitt, too, says above that he is freed in journeying of even his self (“leav[ing] ourselves behind”). The self that Hazlitt writes of leaving, though, is apparently the impeded and burdened self, for as he journeys, he discovers another self: “Then long forgotten things, like ‘sunken wrack and sunless treasures,’ burst upon my eager sight, and I begin to feel, think, and *be myself* again” (182, emphasis added). Again, the natural self seems to be capable of being discovered in the shedding of our social-ness, in a journey into what is natural.

The appeal of this simpler notion of the self and of the self’s relation to the world, perhaps, is obvious. It offers us the possibility of getting away from the world, getting away, even, from our worldly selves. Our students certainly see the appeal. I’m reminded of at least a few of my students’ essays in which they have written about a nostalgia for a more natural self, which equals, for them, a simpler mode of being—e.g., a self that has to worry about tilling the land or making bread for the family dinner, instead of a self that has to worry about paying bills and submitting papers and negotiating the competing versions of self that are maintained at the job, in the classroom, on Facebook, and at the dinner table. I’m reminded, though, too of many of the same student essays in which they experience some paralyzing moment in which they are confronted by a storm or a rattlesnake or a twisted ankle, while walking in the woods. In those moments, they realize that people built what we know to be “modern life” (of self-satisfaction and convenience) for many good reasons: to stave off threats and fears, to make surviving easier, but also so that we can concentrate on other stuff (like how best to treat a horse, how best to educate citizens, how best to negotiate the animosity between warring factions of people).

Sure, taking a walk can be relaxing; even commercials are now advising us to do so. But, my student essayists, even when waxing poetic about the benefits of getting away from it all, always, eventually realize that the effort doesn't actually get us away from our (postmodern) selves. Perhaps this example will do more to reveal my own fears than to prove my point, but I offer this personal example of my own daily walks: there are moments when I find that the rhythm of my own feet and the playful present-ness of my dog's experience of various spots of grass and of the other animals we meet along the way inspire a kind of dumb but also hyper-sensory state in me; however, I never get to stay in that state long. I am constantly jarred back into a much more "postmodern" reality with all of its splintering and spreading power dynamics: by men honking their horns as they pass us, by my comparison of my own body to the bodies of the women we pass at the pool, by the apparent economic differences between the lives lived in the neighborhoods we pass, by the tensions expressed in the "vote for" signs nailed to the yards we pass, and so on.

There is simply no simpler self, not without that simpler self being made in a grand pretend. Even the moments I mention above in which I describe myself as dumb and hypersensitive are not, to my mind, indicators of my having discovered a simpler self. Rather, I suspect that they are simply moments when I am given over to the present and have stopped worrying; they are not the momentary revelations of a distilled me. That said, none of this awareness, in my own or in my students' meanderings in nature and/or on the page, of the essay's failure to really capture a simpler self through the first two conventions of freedom and walking diminishes the essay's valuing of or value granted by voice.

VOICE

The two concepts—voice and walking—are pointing to intimately related processes: the first points to *the power* of the movement of a mind on the page (I'm invoking terms from Peter Elbow's work here, which I'll explore at greater lengths in the coming pages); the latter points to, describes, the movement itself, as I've discussed above. I find, however, in my readings about essays that the concept of voice has emerged as the convention that readers (and presumably, writers) care most about in the genre.⁸ For example, Scott Russell Sanders states, "The essay is a haven for the private, idiosyncratic voice [...]" (190). This assumption about the genre being conducive to the writer's voice is so ingrained in essays and essay scholarship that voice seems an inescapable or inevitable part of the genre. For example, in their Introduction to one of the most widely used essay textbooks *The Fourth Genre*, Robert Root and Michael Steinberg state, "[...W]e are aware of [essayists'] presence, because their voice is personal, indi-

vidual [...]” (xxiv). Again, this statement suggests that voice in an essay is a given (“we are aware”)—but also that it is proof of the essayist’s presence on the page.

In his extensive study of George Eliot’s writing voice over the course of her literary life,⁹ Robert Strange frames much of his study around the assumption that the narrator in her works is the “figure which George Eliot has animated with her own convictions and made to speak with the clarity and authority of her own celebrated authority” (326). It should come as no surprise that Strange can assert that “this figure” re-presents Eliot’s own convictions and speaks with her own authority, given that the text is an essay (specifically, a “moral essay”). Because of the common conception of the essayist-essay relation I’ve been describing, Strange can assert that even through the fictional character in a moral essay, the writer speaks and is manifest. It is through the writer’s “authorial voice,” in particular, that Strange hears the writer in her essays.

In the conventions of freedom, walking, and voice, the assumption is that there is a direct and transparent relationship between the essayist and the essay; in fact, I have often found that this relationship is the ultimate goal, if not the driving force, for writing or teaching the essay. According to voice scholars in Composition Studies, though, it is not through walking [in nature and/or on the page] or even in the freedom of the form that one finds voice; rather, it is through a series of operations—e.g., reflection and speaking/breathing—which can be enacted in a personal essay to create voice in writing.

REFLECTION

In his article addressing the distinction between tone and voice, Taylor Stoehr states, “Voice is the pervasive *reflection*, in written or spoken language, of an author’s character [...]” (150, emphasis added). Like the image we see in the mirror, voice must be a copy of the real face, or in this case, the real writer’s character.¹⁰ Stoehr continues: “There are as many possible voices as there are tones of voice, but a writer has only one voice, and while he may modulate it with many tonalities, it remains his idiosyncratic way of talking” (150). To extend the metaphor of the mirror, then, the image may reflect the apparent changes of the real face—the changes brought on by age, sleep, hairstyle, makeup, and so on—but the image remains, even in all these changes, the unique reflection of the person.

In his Introduction to *Landmark Essays: On Voice and Writing*, Peter Elbow is a bit more careful about asserting that voice is equal to the writer’s self; however, he admits that he “tend[s] to lean toward” (xxviii) the view that “people do have some kind of identity that exists apart from the language they use, and that it’s worth trying to talk about whether or not that identity shows in a textual voice” (xvii). Given his career-long investment in the conceptualizations and pedago-

gies of voice and given the field of Rhetoric and Composition's general understanding of his role as one of the central figures of the Expressivist movement, perhaps it's no surprise that I read Elbow's work as consistently asserting that something of the writer can and should necessarily show up in the voice on the page. As to what the "something" is, though, that's one of the major questions that drives much of his work, and there's no easy way to pin down what that something is.

In investigating the writer-page relation, Elbow draws, in part, on discussions of ethos in order to demonstrate that there is a very old and established tradition that takes seriously the fact "that listeners and readers get a sense of the real speaker and his or her virtue (or the absence of it) through the words on the page" (xvii).¹¹ According to Elbow's argument, the success of a piece is in large part determined by the personality of the writer finding its way onto the page (or into the speech) and, then, into the reader's experience of that page. Consequently, in Stoehr's and Elbow's work on voice in writing, there is at least one common thread—the assumption that language can be used as a medium for capturing some essential part of the writer's self on the page.

If we follow this assumption and apply it to the essay, then it seems easy enough to conclude that in the essay, the mind has a unique opportunity, due to the openness of the form, to take advantage of this conception of language. Imagine: there are no constraints in the form, and the language, itself (the tool for expression), is a veritable reflecting pool.¹² There are at least a few operations that have to be working in order for the process to unfold, though, which I will trace out through an extended engagement with Peter Elbow's work. Those operations include the following: the writer would have to reflect an essential part of his/her self into language, and the language would have to reflect back to the reader not just an image of the writer's self, but some real, meaningful, powerful part of the writer's self. To begin then, these operations lie in a very old theory of language.

SPEAKING IN WRITING: A THEORY OF LANGUAGE

After giving an example of a "jargony piece of educational writing," Elbow states, "[The writer] must have had a sense of the intended meaning and then *constructed* words to express it. The words lack breath or presence. [...It] would take her an extra step of revising—and revising consciously for the sake of voice—to change her written words so as to break out of that *language-construction* into a *saying-of-words* on paper" (*Writing With Power* 288-289, emphasis in text). In sharing this quote with a few of my literature colleagues and my rhetoric colleagues, the response to it is consistent: it usually ranges from raised

eyebrows to an audible “grrr.” When I share the same quote with my Creative Writing colleagues, the response is also consistent, but differently so: it usually ranges from a nod of the head to an audible, “duh!” This difference is interesting. It suggests that what is a given in one sphere is not in another, even though we all teach the same students from the same curriculum in the same department. To my mind, it is The fundamental difference between creative writing teachers’ and scholars’ conceptions of the writer-page relationship and literature teachers’ and scholars’ conceptions of the writer-page relationship. The source of that difference seems to be rooted in two different conceptions of language.

Expressivists, by definition, work from a philosophy of language that privileges the speaking subject, much like what I have found in the work of the French philosopher, Georges Gusdorf. In his work, Gusdorf is interested in the relationship between the writer and the text; he’s especially interested in that relationship with regards to creative nonfiction (e.g., autobiographical) texts, which is why I bring him into this discussion. His most famous and extensive study of that relationship is rendered in *La Parole*, which is a phenomenological philosophy of language that, to my mind, captures in readable and useful ways a logocentric theory of language (one that is reminiscent of the object of much of Jacques Derrida’s criticism).

In “Scripture of the Self: ‘Prologue in Heaven,’” Gusdorf argues that speech “is what constitutes the real and what founds identity” (113). He continues, saying that speech “initiate[s] being” (113). In the context of his larger work, I understand this claim to mean that speaking has the power to create a living, breathing entity, and that in the process of speaking, one can shape that being into an identity... but not just any identity. According to Gusdorf, the initiated being is an extension of the living, coherent, original speaker. This extension is possible because, according to Gusdorf, written or spoken language is consciousness, itself—“inner speech” made external, “expos[ing] the innermost human recesses to inspection and judgment” (113).

In Gusdorf’s model, after speaking, writing becomes “a second incarnation...” of the utterance of the speaker. He states, “[Writing] is the memory and the commemoration of spoken utterances, which thus will be able to confront the very one who, having spoken them, might very well have forgotten them” (114). So, in writing, the writer has the opportunity to study a finite form of the initiated being—which, in the case of creative nonfiction, is his/her self. To put this in phenomenological terms, in writing autobiographically, one discovers the self by making an observable object of it, but an object that is an extension of the original self. The key pay-off for Gusdorf in such a writing exercise is that it is only through the work of autobiography, in which he includes the essay (127), that we are able to search out our true selves, not in comparison to an other that

is not us (like Adam does with Eve) but according to an other that is us.

This objectification of the self onto the page (the making of the flesh-and-blood writer into an “I” or “me” on the page) is important, key in fact, to the concept of voice. It is also responsible, as I will show in the coming pages, for voice’s failure to do what it is supposed to do—to express and empower the self of the writer. To explain how voice is supposed to empower writers, I turn now to some of Peter Elbow’s work on voice. In it, Elbow relies on a theory of language similar to Gusdorf’s (though he does not map it out explicitly, like Gusdorf does), and it is through that theory of language that Elbow argues that by writing—by making our inner speech (i.e., life force) external—we externalize the self. If this externalization is done adequately in writing, then the externalization is of the writer’s life source, which Elbow calls “*resonant voice*.”

Elbow states that resonant voice consists of words that “seem to *resonate with* or *have behind* them the unconscious as well as conscious” writer’s mind. As a result, the reader feels “a sense of presence with the writer” (“About Voice” xxxiv, emphasis in text), and that is where its power lies. Elbow is careful in his phrasing here. He says “a sense of presence,” as if to suggest that the experience is sensory, not necessarily scientific—i.e., predictable, objective, the inevitable consequence of a cause-effect relation. This carefulness in phrasing, tentativeness even, is typical of Elbow’s work on voice. It suggests that he is experimenting with the concept, that he is testing out an idea, practicing, perhaps, the very practices he teaches in his writing textbooks (e.g., the believing/doubting game). I note this in order to clarify the fact that Elbow’s investigations into and experiments with the concept of voice have yet to come to an end. He continually revises them. Thus, his work makes for a difficult object of study, as the object, itself, is often shifting and is still being revised. In this part of his ever-evolving exploration of voice, however, in the claim about words seeming “to resonate with or have behind them the unconscious as well as conscious” writer’s mind, one finds, again and obviously, an emphasis on the writer’s mind somehow being captured and made present in the text.¹³

This emphasis is interesting to the effort in this chapter to investigate the relation between the personal essay and the concept of voice in writing because it demonstrates the sometimes obvious (but often complicated) relationship between the ways in which one Expressivist, Peter Elbow, is emphasizing the writer’s mind-page relation and the ways in which personal essayists, too, have emphasized the same relation. In Elbow’s work and in the arguments about personal essays, this essential part of the writer (his/her mind) may be made present like an image in a mirror or made present in the aural qualities (the resonance) of the text, but the important point here is that the presenting of the mind on the page should be powerful enough that it impacts the reader: s/he sees it, feels it,

and is affected by it, when s/he reads. To encourage that impact, Elbow advises writers to make careful choices about what kind of language they use. This advice is meant to help the student express the “invisible self”—a deeper self that exists behind or hidden within the apparent self, one that is full of power, that can extend itself beyond the physical boundaries of the flesh-and-blood writer, that can manifest in, for example, black squiggles on white pages. This self is, if framed in the discourse of and about the personal essay, the natural state of being that is so essential to the relationship between essayist and essay on which this chapter centers.

RESONANT VOICE: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT

In *Writing With Power*, Elbow states, “[Some people’s] speech sounds wooden, dead, fake. Some people who have sold their soul to a bureaucracy come to talk this way. Some people speak without voice who have immersed themselves in a life-long effort to think logically or scientifically [...]. Some people lack voice in their speech who are simply very frightened [...]” (290). Here, voice is somehow bound to a person’s essence, his/her soul, for in the lines above, it is in selling his/her “soul to bureaucracy” that one might find oneself without a voice. That is, though, only one example of lost voice. The voiceless might be, instead of soul-selling bureaucrats, logically or scientifically-minded. The afraid may also find themselves voiceless.¹⁴ According to this passage, then, it is bureaucracy, logic, science, and/or fear that may steal (or to which one relinquishes) a writer’s voice.

In opposition to this theft or sacrifice, Elbow states, “Writing with voice is writing *into which someone has breathed*” and “[w]riting with real voice has the power to make you pay attention and understand—the words go deep.” He continues, “I want to say that it has *nothing* to do with the words on the page, only with the relationship of the words to the writer—and therefore that the same words could have real voice when written by one person and lack it when written by someone else” (299, emphasis added). In other words, the power of a text hinges on the proximity of the relationship between writer and page, and Elbow takes this relationship very seriously, suggesting a proximity that is similar to the magical acts described in the Old Testament.

To explain, if one takes seriously Gusdorf’s assertion that language is “not simply designation, but an immanent reality by virtue of which it is possible for man to repeat the denominative and at the same time creative act of God” (*Speaking* 12), then one sees how voice works as a divine act. The “first word” of God works like a text that has voice and vice versa. The speaker/writer is able to call into being a self, his/her self, the same self or part of the same self that exists

outside of words into words. Adam is created “in the image of God”... “from the word of God.” In the voice on the page one finds a reflection of the creator, the writer, but most importantly to my point here, one that is alive; some essential, life-giving, life-sustaining force remains.

Following this lineage and applying it to prior discussions about freedom and walking (the return to nature) in the essay, for voice to be breathed into the words on the page and for it to call into being the self that is the writer, the voice and its source must be in its natural state. They cannot be contaminated, diluted, or deadened by bureaucracy, logic, science, or fear. These are important requirements, for it seems that what is driving them is the assumption that such influences impede the expression of the natural (and the most potent) self. If the natural self is impeded, then the power of voice fails, for in voice theory, words not only issue from my essence, but generate power in issuing from and carrying the force of that essence.

According to Elbow, there is evidence of that power in the writer’s words, if they impact the reader’s center. He states, “[...T]he words somehow issue from the writer’s center—even if in a slippery way—and produce resonance which gets the words more powerfully to a reader’s center” (*Writing With Power* 298). To enact resonant voice, then, the words of a text should “somehow issue from the writer’s center,” from his/her essence, resonating powerfully enough to effect a thrust into “the reader’s center.”

As to what that center is, it’s difficult to say. Elbow certainly does not explain explicitly what it is, though he does seem to oscillate in terminology between the writer’s “mind” and the writer’s “center.” If there is a commonality between the two, it is in the assumption that both are the *inside* of a person. The interiority is the writer’s clunky violin or chest cavity (two metaphors Elbow uses at length to explain voice), the place from which s/he can speak his/her self. And in that speaking [of] self, [of] his/her innerness, s/he will assume the creative power of something like a god—the capacity to call his/her self into being. The stakes, for Elbow, are these: real voice is what he hopes to teach his students in order to empower them, for if I see what I am inside—beyond social influences, “impediments,” or obligations—I can use this essence as the space from which to say “no” to those social impositions.

EMPOWERMENT IN VOICE

Within this assumption that voice grants us a space from which to say “no,” voice becomes the means to liberation. Gordon Rohmann and Albert Wlecke state, “[By] merely permitting students to echo the categories of their culture, they would never discover themselves within the writing process” (7). This is

the most common argument for voice—and the rally-cry that has met with the most backlash from composition scholars. Here is the crux of the voice issue: an emphasis on voice is opposed to an emphasis on “the categories of [our] culture.” Voice is invested in who I am essentially, which is necessarily and significantly opposed to who I am socially. To put this in other terms, the thinking around the value of voice in writing (that it liberates) generally goes something like this: my essence is innate, and it is the key to my individuality, to my uniqueness. In a culture that privileges the autonomy of the individual, my uniqueness, and its expression, is not simply innate, but is, in fact, my birthright.

This thinking is rooted in an ideology that is, arguably, the nucleus of Western notions of subjectivity. In this emphasis on the individual and his/her unique essence, social forces or categories are believed to be necessarily working on us to oppress us, to silence our innerness and its potential expression. For Elbow, these social forces may be the socially privileged influences called “bureaucracy” or “science.” For Stoehr, they might be the conventions of literature at a given moment in history. For bell hooks, one of the most celebrated and renowned advocates of voice, they might include racism and sexism.

In hooks’s work, the stakes of voice-in-writing are best demonstrated: it is against the formidable foe of racism that she speaks. In speaking against racism by voicing her self, hooks argues that she moves from object-position (object of racism) to subject-position, to a position of autonomy where she is able to say “no” to racism. hooks states,

[C]oming to voice is an act of resistance. Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others. That way of speaking is characterized by opposition, by resistance. It demands that paradigms shift—that we learn to talk—to listen—to hear in a new way. (53)

The presupposition is that when we don’t speak as individuals, as subjects, we let our selves be defined and interpreted by others, according to assumed social categories (like race, gender, social class, etc). So, for example, in hooks’s experience as a student in a writing class, where “the teacher and fellow students would praise [her] for using [her] ‘true,’ authentic voice” when she wrote a poem in “the particular dialect of Southern black speech,” she felt this praise “mask[ed] racial biases about what [her] authentic voice would or should be” (52). She insists that writers must, instead, write in the voice that can combat stereotypes and racial biases, a voice that she explains as “liberatory voice—that way of speaking

that is no longer determined by one's status as object—as oppressed being" (23). Herein lies the interesting hypocrisy of voice: hooks's concept of voice is about making the writer a subject, not an object, but for me to reflect or resonate or "express" my distinctive self, the self must be objectified in the re-presentation on the page. It becomes that-which-is-outside, that-which-is-there; it becomes that-which-is-me (an object).

This theory of voice, of the self-page relation, hinges on the older, magical theory of language that I articulated earlier, one in which language functions as a vehicle that, basically, carries the essence of an entity. As a result, the self on the page can be pointed to and designated by an object pronoun, such as "me" or "her," but because that reflection is of myself, it can also be designated by a possessive pronoun, such as "my" or "her" ("that is my self, my voice on the page"). In such ways, the self-on-the-page is both separate from the writer and intimately related to it. It is made separate from the writer, in part, out of necessity: if, according to Berry or Hazlitt, one must isolate the self from society, from social influence—making it an entity separate from the social forces that act on/in it—then that self-on-the-page must be separated, even, from the actual self that is the flesh-and-blood writer; it must be separated from all of the impositions on the writer, and it must be purified, distilled in that separating. Yet, even in that separation, the self-on-the-page is still deeply related to the writer—thus the possessive relationship ("that is my voice"), indicating a kind of pointing simultaneously inward and outward to name the relationship, to claim the self-on-the-page.

I acknowledge that this 'me'-on-the-page can influence the reader—and thus, function *like* an agent. But, if the liberatory voice, if the resonant voice, in this conception of subjectivity, is supposed to possess the life force of the writer and is supposed to be an agent (which here equals the slayer of social forces, the shedder of social impositions), then of course, the self-on-the-page fails. It fails because it *is* language, made of language, possible only as language, which is a decidedly "social" phenomenon. Language is its own imposition—giving shape to an experience by giving experience a name, a category ("that is a tree" or "this is love"), a shape that only makes sense in relation to other names, other categories ("it is like a bush but taller" or "it is an affection but more than that"). Montaigne offers one of the best examples of the social phenomenon of language in "Of Experience." He states, "I ask what is 'nature,' 'pleasure,' 'circle,' 'substitution.' The question is one of words, and is answered the same way. 'A stone is a body.' But if you pressed on: 'And what is a body?'—'Substance'—'And what is substance?' and so on, you would finally drive the respondent to the end of the lexicon" (818-819). Language refers to itself; it is, it functions via, relations between and among words, which explain concepts, not the "thing in itself."

Language is not the vehicle for the life force of a living being. Despite any romantic notions about the writer's relationship to the page, we know that words do not carry the writer's mind or soul (if they did, conversations about the value, preservation, and destruction of texts would be very different). Rather, language can only constitute a textual self, one that is then imposed upon when it is read by others—even by the writer.

WHERE VOICE FAILS, WHY IT REMAINS, AND WHERE TO NEXT

Of course, as I've demonstrated in this chapter, this concept of voice in writing does not acknowledge the social theory of language I describe above. Yet, hooks recognizes that voice in writing is always a social act, a political act, that it cannot be isolated from context. Elbow, too, begins his first major book, *Writing Without Teachers*, with this statement: "Many people are now trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically: trying to claim more control over their own lives. One of the ways people lack control over their lives is through lacking control over words" (vii). He acknowledges here that writing is both a personal and political act. Too, if we push our students just a little on this point about language and about the writer-page relation, they, too, see the problems. I've yet to meet a student essayist who has been able to describe his/her self in asocial or pre-social ways, e.g., according to qualities other than his/her class, religious affiliation, political beliefs, etc. Who am I, if not my age, gender, education, ethnicity? Who am I without my relationships to others, as a colleague, sister, teacher, or friend? And, perhaps even more importantly, how can I talk about myself without a culturally, historically, politically-bound language—without using the syntax and vocabulary made available to me by the society I speak within and to?

Too, though "write your true self" might be a call that (re)invests student writers in the work of the writing classroom and (re)invigorates their relationships to their own texts—which, in turn, can (re)make me, as teacher, into an inspiring figure—I, for one, feel very uncomfortable with the requirement that I, then, grade my students' selves-on-the-page. But, all of these points have been made by others, throughout the last few decades, as the Humanities has turned its attention to "the social" (I'll take up this turn at length in Chapter 2). So, why does this particular conception of subjectivity hold such sway over essayists, student essayists, essay scholars, and essay teachers, alike?

Many writers and scholars want to and do buy into a belief in a self untouched by "the social," a self that is pre-social and that they can access through particular practices. Many of the essayists and scholars discussed here work from the assumption that in a more integral self, a different truth—a truer truth—

can be found. This truer truth, if it issues from that essential part of the self, is more powerful. It can make change, influence others, and ultimately, stop the damning social influences that work to bury it. This, I suspect, is why many of my colleagues who are for or against the teaching of the personal essay in our curriculum are quick to point out that one of the benefits and drawbacks (again, depending on if one is for or against the essay) is that these “truer truths” are often those that are felt, that are unprovable, and that in privileging such truths in the essay, those truths can be expressed and, thus, can become part of the discourse (e.g., think of the example of the student who wanted to write about ghosts, which I talk about in the Introduction). The problem, of course, is that such truths, when understood as issuing from the essence of the writer, become undebatable truths; they cannot be proven, cannot be refuted, cannot be analyzed and critiqued beyond their own givens. And, therein lies the danger.

At one time, I, too, wanted access to and permission to express some pre-social self—and all the truths that felt right. But in so doing, as I’ll show in the next chapter, I had enabled a classroom that could only perform at an expressive level, that could not engage beyond solipsistic discovery. This process can be, no doubt, valuable to us and to our students. However, the process cannot stop there, if said truths are going to get any traction in the discourses in which we work and/or want to participate.

In conclusion, for all its virtues in encouraging students to write and in helping composition and essay scholars to articulate the relationship between the writer and the self-on-the-page, voice theory doesn’t allow me to voice my center, my innerness without making an object (something exterior) of it—an object that is, ironically, made of the social stuff of language. I encounter this self, this voice, through the operation of objectification, where the self-on-the-page is not my mind, but an object rendered in language that is perceptible by my mind. The most damning problem, though, is that in that move to objectify my mind by expressing it on the page, I do not negotiate with the social and overcome it; rather, I [pretend to] avoid “the social,” altogether—which, to be frank, can only make me impotent, even irrelevant, in relation to it.

These failings of voice theory have expansive implications. For example, if the writer is not writing and the reader is not reading the essayist’s self, as subject, on the page, as is so often assumed, then what is being written/read? If the essay is not the writer’s manifested mind on the page, then how does one argue for any interesting relationship between writer and page? Can one derive the latter’s meaning in relation to the former (or vice versa)? The questions proliferate, as do their consequences. Perhaps, the most important question is this: If I can’t discover and express my self through voice in an essay in order to know my natural self and to resist the oppressive forces working to manipulate me, then by

what other means can I know my self, if at all, and negotiate with or resist those forces in writing? To come at this question and a few of the earlier questions from another angle, this project turns now to the other side of the debate over subjectivity in writing—the social.

NOTES

4. It's important to note, at the beginning of this exploration, that essayists tend to differ about what kind or aspects of self one might meet on the page. However differently essayists might describe the particulars of what they see on the page, though, they generally agree that one can see the writer's self on the page through the conventions of the personal essay.

5. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato calls the mind “the pilot of the soul” (52).

6. Undoubtedly, walking-as-essaying is an old and persistent analogy. According to Paul Heilker in his landmark text, *The Essay: Theory and Pedagogy for an Active Form*, the analogy has its roots in the “consistent and unbroken line of agreement about the nature and form of the essay running from its originators to contemporary essayists and theorists: the essay is kineticism incarnate—the embodiment of perpetual mobility, motion, and movement” (169). For example, in a study on the essay as a reflective text, Réda Bensmaïa states that the essay is “an efficacious means to realize and implement the mind's ‘mobility’” (xxx). Thus, the essayist does not simply describe the walking mind, but the essay, itself, is walking because it is a fluid, moving form.

As Paul Heilker examines much more extensively in *The Essay*, there are many images used to describe the movement of the essay: flying, slithering, flowing, journeying, walking, rambling, wandering, meandering, roaming, exploring, searching, seeking, venturing, following, tracking, and hunting. These images, he groups together in some cases, but notes that they constitute “an extended family of tropes which relies, at its core, upon a conflation of physical, mental, and textual journeying” (173). Heilker continues, “Upon this notion of the essay as journeying is built a branching family of closely related images, the most elementary of which is the image of essay, essay writing, and essay reading as walking” (174). Again, “walking” is not simply an image or a trope for what the essay looks like, but is a description of the essay as “kineticism incarnate.”

7. It should be noted that part of the appeal of the “walking” metaphor is that it is vague. As I've explained in the section in this chapter titled “Freedom,” the essay is supposed to be unstructured. Heilker builds on this idea that the essay is unstructured in the traditional sense (e.g., like a scholarly argument) but argues that it is still organized, that it still has “form.” Specifically, he argues that the essay is organized “chrono-logically,” which is a term he uses to describe a kind of kairos-driven orga-

nization of thought, where in the process of writing, the writer responds to what s/he is writing. As such, the text moves in an unstructured but organized way.

8. No doubt, this is because of the long and passionate practice (by rhetoric and composition scholars and essayists, alike) of polarizing the essay and the argument as irreconcilable opposites with the one championing personal voice and the latter championing scholarly authority. See William Gass's "Emerson and the Essay" for a particularly powerful example of this polarization from a writer who is both an essayist and scholar.

9. This kind of work—extensive studies of particular writers' voices—is done much more often in literary criticism than in composition scholarship. This is one of the critiques in current discussions of voice in the field of Composition Studies—that voice-invested scholarship has not done enough work to apply a theory of voice to particular texts (see, for example, Elbow's relatively recent *College English* article, "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries").

10. In voice scholarship, there is rarely a distinction made between "author" and "writer"—a point that Harris makes in his treatment of Elbow's work in his chapter on voice in *A Teaching Subject*. There is a difference, however, when the two concepts are considered through the lens of Foucault's work. For Foucault and in most poststructuralist theory and scholarship, the author is but a conception of the writer. It is based on what is known of the writer through his/her written texts, and this knowledge is social, contextual; it circulates in a culture and informs the ways in which a text circulates. The writer is something else. It is, too, a concept, but it refers to the one who writes, not the figure in whose conception we can (or, according to Barthes, should not) read a text.

More to the point here, in Stoehr's work there seems to be no distinction between author and writer. I use his choice of word in this section in order to avoid any confusion created by my using a different term.

11. "Virtue," as the key ingredient in effective ethos, comes to us from the works of classical rhetors (e.g., Aristotle). Elbow is drawing on this tradition.

12. Of course, since Nietzsche first wrote "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" (in 1873), if not since the sophists (see Susan Jarratt's *Rereading the Sophists*), the transparency of language has been called into question. Nietzsche famously explains in "Truth and Lies" that language always operates as metaphor, that it cannot capture "the thing in itself," so to speak, that it is an arbitrary designation for some piece of reality—e.g., the designation of T-R-E-E for the reality of the tree—and that, really, we are only getting access to the human conception of that piece of reality when we invoke the [relative] word. Thus, in order to buy this argument about the transparency of language, one must first buy into a much older theory of language—one that is intensely problematic for granting language a power that I can only describe as "magical."

13. There are ways in which Elbow's work has been inherited by the field as utterly and perfectly Expressivist in nature, when in truth, it is not necessarily so—a terrible consequence, perhaps, of the “author function,” as Foucault explains it. Much of my reading of his work is informed and therefore limited, inevitably, by that inheritance.

14. Stoehr argues that these influences—of fear or uncertainty, namely—are “failures of tone” (150). In his model, tone is “an author's attitude toward his audience,” which he argues is different from “an author's character.” The difference in each scholar's assessment of what one calls “failure of tone” and the other “voicelessness” seems to be the result of what are different projects: Elbow is interested in voice-as-empowerment; Stoehr is interested in distinguishing between tone and voice.