

“PERSONAL WRITING” AND “EXPRESSIVISM” AS PROBLEM TERMS

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When dispute about something goes round and round without resolution, it's often a sign that the key term has too many unexplored meanings. I aim to show a kind of hidden ambiguity in “Personal Writing” and “Expressivism,” and show how this leads to confusion and bad thinking. First, I'll explore the ambiguity in “personal writing.” Then I'll explore “expressivism.” James Berlin said that personal writing—writing about the self—is the hallmark of expressivism and named me as a prime expressivist. I'll try to explain why I and other so-called “expressivists” made a prominent place for personal writing but didn't consider it better or more important than other kinds of writing.

PART I: DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF PERSONAL WRITING

The term personal writing has caused needless argument and confusion because in fact there is no such thing as “personal writing” in itself. There are three different dimensions of the personal and they can be present in various combinations in any piece of writing. The *topic* can be personal or not; the language can be personal or not; and the thinking can be personal or not.

Typical personal topics are the feelings or experiences of the particular writer.

Typical personal language is everyday spoken, colloquial, vernacular, or low-register language and syntax.

Typical personal thinking makes use of metaphors, feelings, associations, hunches, and other such processes that are not systematic or disciplined.¹

THE TOPIC CAN BE PERSONAL—OR NOT

A personal topic might be “My Experiences with Revising” or “My Experiences in the Peace Corps in Haiti.” A striking example is Margaret Bullet-Jonas' *Holy Hunger*, a penetrating account of her struggles with an eating disorder. Personal topics contrast with nonpersonal topics like these: “The Revising Practices of First-Year Students” or “How the Peace Corps Works” or “Conditions

in Haiti after the Hurricane” or “Cultural Causes of Eating Disorders.” Essays on these nonpersonal topics might never treat the writer or her experience at all.

Obviously there is a continuum or spectrum between completely personal and nonpersonal topics. One example is common in journalism or magazine writing and some books: the writing is based on interviews and it almost floods the reader with the most deeply personal details of someone’s life, often using lots of personal language from the interviewee. Yet the writer remains completely hidden and uses no personal language in his or her own voice. Here’s another marginal case: a writer takes a seemingly personal topic—say his or her own alcohol use—and make it nonpersonal by taking a wholly detached, medical, or phenomenological approach. (Sometimes this is not so much a way of making the topic impersonal as using highly detached impersonal thinking or language for a personal topic.)

There’s a kind of hybrid between personal and nonpersonal that has become a recognizable genre in first-year writing courses: teachers have discovered that students often do a better job with “academic research”—e.g., eating habits or college study habits—if the writer also uses the paper to explore his or her own personal experiences in the area. Of course adults and professionals do the same thing. 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. Keith Gilyard uses alternate chapters to focus on the personal and nonpersonal as a topic in *Voices of the Self*.

Though we thus see marginal or mixed topics, the main point bears repeating: the topic can be personal or not regardless of whether the thinking or language is personal.

THE LANGUAGE CAN BE PERSONAL—OR NOT

What is personal language? We usually call language personal if it uses slang or colloquial forms or an informal register. There’s a natural implied metaphor here of physical closeness and presence (a “metaphor we live by”): when someone gets very close it feels personal. What’s closest and most personal is 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.

A word like “talky” feels more personal than “colloquial;” “figure out” than “conclude.” A certain number of teachers and academic journals ban contractions: contractions give the sound of speech; non-contractions give a sound less

heard in speech. The first person “I” calls attention to the presence of the writer and presumably this explains the ritual prohibition against it in many academic 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 enough to be regarded as too personal for some academic writing. Because most of these features give a greater sense of presence or of contact between writer and reader, Deborah Tannen and other linguists call them “involvement” strategies.

The use of a question can make language more personal by implying conversational contact between writer and reader. Compare these two passages:

There is only a faint and ambiguous correlation between prostate cancer and a high PSA reading.

But how about PSA tests for prostate cancer? How much can we trust them?

Again it must be remembered that there’s no black/white dividing line between personal and nonpersonal language, but rather a continuum.

Personal language can be used for nonpersonal topics. The most obvious site is in much note-taking, freewriting, rough exploratory writing, and informal letter writing when the topic is wholly nonpersonal and perhaps scholarly—for example even some technical scientific topic. Email has increased the amount of personal language and personal thinking used for nonpersonal topics.

But do we find personal language in published writing about nonpersonal topics? If we look back over the last fifty years or so at newspapers, magazines, and nonfiction for a wide audience, we notice a general drift along the continuum towards more informal, personal registers in published writing. Such informality of language was often experienced as a violation of “proper standards for writing.” But 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.

In *The New Yorker*—a magazine that’s always been fastidious about language—we find a growing use of informal colloquial language. Look at the first sentence in the second paragraph below:

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, 2002, p. 56)

William Safire often took a conservative line about language in his *New York Times* columns, so it's striking to see how much personal language he used for the nonpersonal topic of correct and incorrect language. His writing was often conversational, casual, first person, sometimes slangy. He celebrated the clash of registers and liked sudden swerves into the personal, especially in asides: "In the age of multiculturalism and interdisciplinarianism (there's a new one), most of the nonscientific uses of the term have been pejorative." In the same column, he started a section with a one-sentence paragraph: "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?"

Students often use informal language for impersonal topics even if they have been directed to avoid it. But teachers should note 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. Anne Herrington writes: "Failing to recognize the presence of [linguistic] rendering [of personal experience] in some academic writing—including writing within composition studies—contributes to dismissing its value in undergraduate writing" (2002, p. 233). A number of business genres, however, are notable for strenuously resisting personal language.

In published academic writing we also see a gradual slide toward informal language over the last fifty years. Changes might seem subtle if you are in the middle of them, but I gather that scholarly writing in, say, Spain and Germany retains a formality that has been abandoned here. On the other hand, it's interesting to note nontrivial movement in the other direction toward a formal register in academic writing in our field. Essays from the early days of *College Composition and Communication* tended 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, say, Edward Corbett and James Corder—esteemed scholars who nevertheless pulled their chair up close to readers and talked fairly personally and directly to them. Also, older scholarship in English studies tended to follow a British tradition of scholarly writing that was slightly talkier than the more formal nonpersonal Germanic tradition in scholarship adopted in the academic world some time in the twentieth century. (Essays for a student audience are more likely to use more personal language, yet oddly enough, it can work the other way too. When Martha Kolln addresses other teachers in the instructor's manual of her *Rhetorical Grammar* (1991, p. 15), she is willing to write more personally than she does to students: she talks personally about an

anecdote from her life, but doesn't permit herself this kind of informality in the book intended for students.)

When academics publish a talk or speech, they are likely to use more informal colloquial personal language (though I've often been asked by copy editors to remove such language when I've had a talk accepted for publication).

Nonpersonal language can also be used for personal topics. We often don't notice impersonal language 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 writers are often especially strong. Training in academic discourse goes deep. Copy editors may weed out locutions in a personal or informal register that remain in the writer's final draft. Consider Jane Hindman's amazingly personal essay that also uses an experimental form: three different type faces for three different voices. It's deeply confessional about personal matters that few are willing to address. Yet not much of the language itself is particularly personal; most of it is either standard edited English or even quite academic. I noticed only three exceptions: three short italicized paragraphs of inner speech dropped in at different points that use distinctly personal writing. For another example, Mary Louise Buley-Meissner speaks of a 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” (1990, p. 52).

The most striking 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 the personal issues of other people. The topic is a very personal story, but the language will usually be in the rubber-gloved, nonpersonal register of their discipline.

THINKING TOO CAN BE PERSONAL—OR NOT

What is personal thinking? The notion might seem counterintuitive and a few people might argue that thinking is only thinking if it follows rules of deductive logic. But the word “thinking” is not normally used so narrowly in English. Common parlance applies the term to a broad range of cognitive processes: metaphorical thinking, trains of feelings, story telling, illustrative examples or anecdotes, inferences based on association rather than strict logic, and perhaps even mere hunches. 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 that has had a stranglehold on the teaching of writing (1998, p. 24). And feminists have written about how the term “thinking” has been too narrowly defined in ways that represent patriarchy (Falmagne).

A particular kind of personal thinking could be called narrative thinking. 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 abstract categories. But late in his career he wrote a notable and influential book, *Actual Minds*, arguing that narrative thinking is equally central in human thinking (1986). Anthropologists like Lévi-Strauss showed how myths are examples of vigorous thinking about large nonpersonal issues. Mina Shaughnessy praised Richard Hoggart and James Baldwin for their skill in using autobiography to do intellectual work (Bartholomae, 1980). See also the special issue of *Pre/Text* devoted to personal and expressive writing doing the work of academic discourse (Elbow, 1990).

Again, it's obvious that there is an extended continuum between nonpersonal and personal thinking.

In addition, personal thinking is often applied to nonpersonal topics. Montaigne enacted and celebrated what can only be called personal thinking, even when his topic was nonpersonal (the education of children, for example). Because he actually invented the essay and named it with a word that means "an attempt," many have argued that the essay itself is a genre with an inherent link to informal personal thinking. He associated what is "human" with what is not "ordered" by a strict (French) "method." Naturally, much poetry too applies personal, intuitional, associative thinking to nonpersonal topics (for example, Wallace Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West").

Ken Macrorie made an important contribution to our field with his "I Search Essay," showing countless students how to get more invested in serious research by bringing personal intuitive thinking to bear. And there has been an explosion of interest in creative nonfiction, a genre that often applies personal thinking to nonpersonal topics. William Safire liked to do policy analysis by pretending to get inside the feelings of public figures:

I am John Kerry, falling farther behind in the polls with only six weeks to go.

I've already shaken up my staff again ...

The "fortunate son" business hasn't hurt Bush—and I wasn't exactly born in a log cabin. (2004)

When Nicholas Baker writes about the impersonal topic of punctuation he conveys lots of history and technical information, but his actual mode of thinking about it is often strikingly personal. And his language slides toward the colloquial and personal. Peter Medawar, Nobel prize winner in biology, writes eloquently about the difference between the associational and intuitive thinking that scientists use to figure out their hypotheses, and the nonpersonal disciplined form in which they typically present their findings. Nancy Sommers

uses her feelings to help her think about the nonpersonal topic of revising. Jane Hindman thinks with her experience—noticing one feeling and then probing and waiting to find another feeling underneath it—in order to wrestle with the 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.

IS THIS DIFFERENTIAL ANALYSIS NECESSARY?

This is not just an exercise in casuistic categorizing for its own sake (which might occasionally have been a temptation for Aristotle). I see the same practical consequences for this analysis as I argued in my discussion of five species of voice (1994b) and multiple species of academic discourse (1991). When people fail to notice that a single term is hiding multiple meanings, they often think carelessly and argue fruitlessly past each other: they are unconsciously assuming different definitions of personal writing, voice, or academic discourse.

For example, readers often assume that a text is personal because it is more or less dominated by, say, strongly personal language (what a reader might call “flagrantly personal”). They fail to consider the nonpersonal nature of the topic and even the thinking. This kind of misjudgment is particularly harmful when a teacher tells the student, “this is too personal.” The student is liable to try to push the thinking and the focus of the topic even further towards the impersonal—often making the essay ineffectively general and abstract. How much better if the teacher could have said, “It’s only your language that is too personal for this context.” It might even be that the essay would have been better if the student nudged the thinking and topic focus a bit more in the personal direction. By the same token, an essay might be almost embarrassingly self-disclosing in topic—but not in language or thinking. (I’d say that Jane Tompkins sometimes wanders in this direction.)

When teachers or other readers take enough care to notice, for example, the differences between personal elements among the three dimensions of writing, they also have a better chance of attending to their own personal reactions and engaging in careful thinking: “This paper really irritates me. I wonder why. Has it touched on a sore spot for me, or is there in fact a feature in the text that asks readers to experience something challenging or ‘in your face?’”

The kind of differential analysis I’ve been using here has led me to argue more generally for rubrics in teacher response and assessment (and sometimes even peer response). Readers who fail to distinguish among the dimensions of a text (e.g., thinking, organization, clarity of sentences, mechanics) often fall into snap holistic judgments. This kind of unthinking interpretation is particularly

harmful when a paper is full of errors in grammar and spelling—especially grammar that a teacher unconsciously associates with “stupid.” Such a teacher fails to see many genuine strengths in the paper and therefore gives misleading and actually damaging feedback—or an invalid grade. Here’s a sad comment by an experienced teacher about a piece of writing by speaker of African-American English: “Only now can I really address the underlying thinking and understanding problems—because previously the writing was so atrocious that I couldn’t see them.” (I took this from a composition listserv.) In a comparable way, an entire essay can seem to be tainted for some readers because it embodies political or religious or cultural views that the teacher experiences as toxic.

PART II: MY RELATIONSHIP WITH PERSONAL WRITING AND EXPRESSIVISM

I wonder whether you noticed that my own writing throughout Part One is almost entirely nonpersonal—in topic, thinking, and language. Perhaps the language might be experienced by some readers as slightly personal because I avoided a “formal” or “high” register—and occasionally used “I.” But does that make it “personal”? I’d say no. Still, in the next section I want to let my writing be personal on all three dimensions: personal topic, personal thinking, and (fairly) personal language.

I’m not using Part Two merely as an illustration of the analysis in Part One. No; I’ve written this stylistically schizophrenic essay in order to enact my divided loyalties to personal writing. For I keep bouncing back and forth in my feelings about personal writing:

First bounce. I tried to keep anything personal out of Part One because I want you to assess it entirely in terms of the logic of its analysis. For example, when I pointed out how many writers mix the personal and nonpersonal in the same essay, I hope it was clear that I wasn’t expressing approval—just making an empirical claim in order to bolster my main analytic argument about how the different dimensions of the personal are separate and can be mixed.

Second bounce. But I know it’s impossible to make a purely rational disinterested argument that works entirely on its own logic. You could even say that it’s intellectually dishonest to pretend to do so. Any attempt to argue in this way will always be surreptitiously slanted by the writer’s position. This principle implies that we have a duty, as writers, to reveal our personal stake; to acknowledge that readers can’t assess our argument unless they know something about the position we write from.

I agree with this view in many situations. I get irritated with argumentative writing (especially by academics) where the writer pretends to be making a dis-

interested or objective case, yet that case is permeated by surreptitious personal feelings: the writer is secretly trying to settle a score with a critic, or trying to defend a pet theory that he himself has a big stake in, or trying to preen his or her erudition, or salve a wounded ego. When an academic is good at this game, only readers “in the know” will see these backstage hidden agendas. Why do the conventions of academic discourse still reflect a pretense of objectivity, when academics themselves are so busy saying that objectivity is impossible?

Third bounce. Still, I want to push back against my argument in the second bounce. I’m deeply committed to the idea no one has an obligation to reveal themselves more than they want. One of the great glories of writing is that it permits us to disguise our voices or hide our feelings. An argument can be good or bad apart from who makes it or what the personal motivation might be. The anonymity that is possible through the technology of writing has made it possible for countless people, especially in stigmatized groups, to persuade readers who would not otherwise have listened to them. Just because perfect objectivity is not possible, that doesn’t mean that we can’t strive toward it and make good headway.

Fourth bounce. Still, any attempt I might make to hide behind impersonal writing was probably wasted on many readers, since I have come to be so widely identified with personal writing. In the early 1980s, Berlin defined me as a prime expressivist, and this characterization was widely accepted. So it’s not really possible for me to pretend to be disinterested.

So now I want to tell the story of my relationship to expressivism and personal writing. I will invite all three personal dimensions into my text. I may not be writing here about my sex life or my feelings about a sunset, but it’s a personal story nevertheless. The topic is personal: like most of us, I have personal feelings about certain “academic” topics. The thinking is personal too: it reflects not just my thinking but my feelings and intuitions and how my personal position influences my take on personal writing and expressivism. And so too, the language is fairly personal: it may not be slangy or “colloquial,” but it’s not far from my “vernacular”—the language that comes most naturally to my white middle class academic mouth. (Perhaps the language in Parts One and Two is pretty much the same: kind of halfway between personal and impersonal.)

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When Berlin called me a poster boy for expressivism in the 1980s, he must have been thinking mostly about my *Writing Without Teachers*, published in 1973. For his later article in 1988, he also looked at *Writing With Power* (1985), but that book is remarkably impersonal compared to the 1973 book. So I will be referring here mostly to *Writing Without Teachers* in trying to figure out why

I was so identified with personal writing.

Actually, there are two questions that need exploring: Why did Berlin and so many readers think that *Writing Without Teachers* itself was personal? And why did Berlin and so many readers think my goal in the book was to advocate or preach personal writing?

1. I don't think the book was very personal, but I understand now why it was so often felt that way. Let's look at the three dimensions:

Language. Not very personal, I'd say. Here's a typical example. You'll see "I" a number of times, but the word is not really very personal; it's functioning as a generalized claim about people in general.

We all tend to believe in word-magic: if I think words, my mind will be tricked into believing them; if I speak those words, I'll believe them more strongly; and if I actually write them down, I am somehow secretly committed to them and my behavior is determined by them. It is crucial to learn to write words and not believe them or feel hypnotized at all. It can even be good practice to write as badly or as foolishly as you can. If you can't write anything at all, it is probably because you are too squeamish to let yourself write badly.
(1973/1998, p. 70)

"I" is called a "personal" pronoun, but it's pretty clear in this passage that it refers not to me but to other people who have feelings different from mine. (I fear I've always had a weakness for overusing "I" and "we" in ways that are theoretically suspect—betraying a tendency to assume "we're all alike.") But despite all the "I"s in that passage, I'm struck with how seldom I used the word throughout the book.

Perhaps in 1973, my language might have struck academic readers as personal or speech-like, but I was trying to talk to a popular audience. When I wrote the book, I didn't foresee that so many academics would read it. I had taught for almost twenty years, but had never been in an English department nor identified with the field of composition. It's ironic that this least academic of all my books would be read more often than any of the others in graduate seminars.

Thinking. The thinking in *Writing Without Teachers* was indeed very personal, and I think that's the biggest reason why so many readers experienced the book as personal. What interested me most, and still does, is thinking. (I'm hoping that my tombstone will read, "He loved thinking.") I wanted to show that our thinking doesn't have to be formal and impersonal or strictly logical when we work on nonpersonal or academic topics.

I was trying to describe the writing process as a personal process—and make

my description informal too. I used lots of homely details from everyday life. At the conceptual center of the book were two homely metaphors: “cooking” and “growing”—idiosyncratic and personal. (My Oxford editor advised me to drop those metaphors.) At one point I used a kooky childish analogy for the mystery of the writing process: I asked readers to imagine a land where people couldn’t understand how to touch the floor with their fingers because the traditional belief was that one did it by reaching upwards. Thus their traditional process for floor-touching never worked. Yet there were a few people who had actually learned to touch the floor—by instinct or trial and error—but they couldn’t explain how they did it because their whole conceptual system was confused about up and down (1973/1998, p. 13).

After this book came out in 1973 I began to get a trickle of letters from strangers addressing me quite personally, as though they felt they knew me. I didn’t mind; indeed I felt kind of touched, but it’s always seemed a little curious. For I hadn’t revealed much about me in *Writing Without Teachers*. Yes, I acknowledged—quite briefly—that my interest and relationship to writing grew out of my own difficulties and struggle and even failure. But I told almost nothing of what actually happened—which was in fact a very personal story. Nor did I tell virtually anything about my life.

But though I didn’t let my life or my “self” show, I let my mind show. It was because my thinking was so personal that some readers felt they knew me. And why not? It turns out that when someone gives an accurate picture of their thinking processes—with all its idiosyncratic twists and turns rather than the neatened picture of thinking that writers often publish, especially academic writers—readers often feel they know the writer. (My wife once quipped that the book invited the reader into bed with me. But this had to be based only on my thinking. A fun idea: thinking as sex appeal?)

Topic. In *Writing Without Teachers*, I let my mind show, but my mind was not at all the topic of the book—nor my self nor my feelings. The topic of *Writing Without Teachers* was squarely nonpersonal: the process of writing. I used the book to tell people—obsessively—what they should do to make their writing go better. I may have 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. It wasn’t till 1998, when I wrote “Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard” and also the Preface to 2nd edition of *Writing Without Teachers*, that I told my personal story of failing and then gradually figuring out a way of writing. Of course it was easier in 1973 to qualify as a flaming show off than it is now—especially in the light of the all the recent self-disclosure by academics.

In short it was not at all a “me me me book.” (Berlin wrote in 1982 that “ex-

pressionistic rhetoric” involves the “placement of the self at the center of communication” [p. 772.] It was, however, a kind of “you you you” book. I couldn’t stop talking about what “you” should learn to do to make the writing process more successful and satisfying. Maybe this gave a kind of personal feeling to the topic. Of course I didn’t know anything at all about my readers, but maybe my strategy led them to think a lot about themselves. I guess by saying “you you you,” I was using an “involvement strategy.”

So was *Writing Without Teachers* a piece of personal writing? The question has no answer. It illustrates why we need the analysis I gave in Part One. The book was notably personal in thinking, but not personal in language, and mostly not in topic. The reception of the book as personal by so many readers confirms my hypothesis at the end of Part One: readers are sometimes tempted to ignore nonpersonal dimensions when one dimension seems strikingly personal.

2. Why did so many readers think my goal in the book was to advocate or preach personal writing? Why did Berlin consider me an archetypal expressivist—someone committed to writing about me, me, self, self, feelings, feelings—only what is internal? And why does he name me as the central figure of expressivism (1988)—a school he said is based on this premise: “Truth is conceived as the result of a private vision” (1982)?

In his later essay (“Rhetoric and Ideology”) he quotes my 1985 *Writing With Power* to argue that I “consistently” preach personal writing. But to make his case, he purposely misquotes me to pretend that my words champion personal, expressive, self-oriented writing when they are actually saying the opposite. Berlin writes:

This power [that Elbow advocates] is consistently defined in personal terms: “power comes from the words somehow fitting the writer (not necessarily the reader) ... power comes from the words somehow fitting what they are about. [Berlin’s ellipses] (1988, p. 485)

Look at the words I actually wrote—by way of introducing two chapters about power coming from nonself:

... I think true power in words is a mystery.... In [the previous] Chapters 25 and 26 about voice, I suggest that power comes from the words somehow fitting the writer (not necessarily the reader).... In [the following] Chapters 27 and 28 about breathing experience into writing, I suggest that power comes from the words somehow fitting what they are about. The words so well embody what they express that when readers encounter the words they feel they are encountering the

objects or ideas themselves.... (280)

And if he had read the chapters these words were introducing, he would have found passages like these. First the epigraph by Basho:

Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one.

And then this passage in a subsection titled “A Warning about Feelings:”

But strong feelings in themselves, don't help you breathe experience into words. In fact some of the worst writing fails precisely because it comes too much out of feelings rather than out of the event or scene itself—out of the bamboo. (1988, p. 334)

How can someone pretend to be a scholar and use manipulative ellipses to pretend that a passage fits his ideological thesis when it actually contradicts it?

I was angry and even hurt to see such an unscholarly distortion of my work. I've never recognized myself in his picture—nor the stereotypical pictures of the other main expressivists like Macrorie, Britton, and Murray. Indeed, I'd say that Berlin's characterization of expressionism was harmful for the field. I considered trying to write back and argue against his reading, but whenever I've seen people do that, they always sound like wounded ineffectual whiners. One friend told me that I looked arrogant not to argue against Berlin in print—as though I didn't deign to enter the fray—but I ended up feeling that it would have been futile; that the only constructive thing I could do was to carry on with my own work and not be deflected or thrown off course.

It's intriguing that his picture of me and the field persuaded so many people in composition studies. His division of the field into one right school and three wrong ones somehow took deep root and finally became an almost universally unexamined assumption. (See, for example, Victor Villanueva's “The Personal,” (2001, p. 52), and Greg Myers (1986, p. 64).)

But as I put away my anger at his wrong-headed picture of my work—and his rhetorical brilliance in making everyone accept his picture of the field—perhaps I can see how it happened.

In truth I was preaching personal writing—in a sense. That is, I was preaching freewriting (among other things), and that seems like mostly personal writing. Freewriting gives you no time to plan, and in its default exercise form there

is no specified topic. In those conditions, people tend to freewrite personally. I guess he was hypnotized by what seems like the inherently personal nature of freewriting (it seemed much more controversial and dangerous than it does now).

But in preaching freewriting, I was preaching a process—a process designed to lead to any kind of product, not personal writing. Freewriting is a means to an end—to help you learn to write more fluently and easily and to find more words and thoughts. The process has no bias at all toward personal writing. In fact, freewriting as a process is not inherently personal. Many people use freewriting to explore completely nonpersonal topics. I'd guess that most of the freewriting I've done in my life (excluding journal writing) is nonpersonal in content (though using personal language).

Berlin quotes words from the opening of *Writing Without Teachers* about my goal in the book: “to help students become ‘less helpless both personally and politically’ by enabling them to get ‘control over words’”(1973/1998, p. 485). He pretends this means that the goal is personal writing and can't see how that goal (as with freewriting) pertains to all kinds of writing, not just personal writing.

In fact, as I look back at *Writing Without Teachers*, I'm amused to notice how narrow and bookish were the examples of writing tasks that I tended to use. I think I spoke about an essay on the causes of the French Revolution. My editor at the time joked that even though the book pretended to be about writing without teachers, really I hadn't yet learned to escape the classroom. I remember inserting, late, some examples of fiction, poetry, and memoir, but they were token examples. I knew nothing about that kind of writing; school writing was all I knew.

Of course freewriting often does lead to personal writing. But I'd say that my main goal in making lots of space for personal writing was to help inexperienced or timid 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 to me then, and still seem, 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. Thus they have more authority about the topic.² And when we invite personal thinking, we invite people to develop ideas by following their own personal and idiosyncratic thought processes—using hunches, metaphors, associations, and 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. Of course disciplined thinking is also necessary, but as I argued, it needs to come afterwards in a writing process

that consciously separates noncritical generating from detached critical judging.

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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 edit many of one’s freely written words (“taking a razor to one’s own flesh” was one way I put it in another metaphor of personal thinking), but that critical process didn’t need to interfere with a happy and self-confident process of generating words and ideas.

I was also preaching the teacherless writing class. Like freewriting, it was designed to help people do all kinds of writing and it carried no bias toward personal writing. But like freewriting, the process itself must have seemed flagrantly personal: no teacher; no one with sanctioned expertise; people (often personal friends) sit around talking about the feelings and thoughts that come into their minds as they hear or read each others’ texts. Joe Harris complained that “the students in [a teacherless class] ... do not seem to be held answerable to each other as intellectuals” (1997, p. 31). In this age of the internet and Wikipedia we can forget how unusual it was to propose a teacherless writing class in 1973. Perhaps it was asking too much of Berlin even in the 1980s to read carefully enough to see that the teacherless peer process I laid out was quite disciplined and methodical—and not especially personal. For example, if a responder in a teacherless class talks about her feelings that occur as she reads a writer’s text, her topic is not her feelings; her topic is the writer’s text and what those feelings reveal about it.

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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. I’d say that all of us defended and even celebrated personal writing in a school context where it had been neglected or even banned. But we didn’t call personal writing any better than nonpersonal writing. Unfortunately, the term expressivism has been sold and widely bought as a label for the essence of my work—and that of a whole school of others—allegedly preaching that students should always use personal language and thinking and 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. But neither of them or any of the others, as far as I know, ever used the term as a label for people. They wouldn’t have spoken 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.

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 that there’s a single kind of writing that can be so described—instead of recognizing how the personal and the nonpersonal are often mixed across three dimensions.

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 the complex things that go on when people write and eager to help people become more consciously strategic in managing their writing process. 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.³

NOTES

1. My analysis could be called Aristotelian. Aristotle loved to increase clarity and precision by dividing entities into sorts or parts or species. In past essays, I’ve found this strategy helpful for clarifying controversies about voice and academic discourse. I tried to reduce confusion and dispute about the concept of voice in writing by showing that there are actually five kinds of voice that can exist in a text: audible voice or intonation—the sounds in a text; dramatic voice or the sense of a person or character or implied author; recognizable or distinctive voice—a voice characteristic of a particular writer; voice with authority—“having a voice”; and resonant voice or presence. I applied the same strategy to academic discourse, arguing that we can reduce confusion and needless dispute if we notice differences between different species of academic discourse and always specify which kind we are talking about. For example, different disciplines use significantly different conventions and kinds of language (i.e., kinds of organization, reasoning, and what counts as evidence). Look even at the single discipline of English where there are significant differences among the conventions used in textual criticism, biographical criticism, psycho-

analytic criticism, reader response criticism, phenomenological, and postmodern criticism. (Here’s an amusing but nontrivial difference: most literature teachers will consider a student hopelessly naive about academic discourse if he or she refers to Hemingway as “Ernest.” Yet if it’s a paper in biographical criticism, the usage can be perfectly appropriate.)

2. Bartholomae is interested in the dilemma of student authority over writing: the “central problem of academic writing, where students must assume the right of speaking to someone who knows more about baseball or ‘To His Coy Mistress’ than the student does” (1985, p. 140). He can’t seem to imagine that a student could know more about baseball than he—or if not baseball, then perhaps her father’s experience in Vietnam or her brother’s way of negotiating Asperger’s. He can’t seem to accept the possibility of inviting students to enter a rhetorical space where they have more authority than he.

3. But Tom Newkirk has hope for the word: “The term ‘expressionist’ may eventually serve us well. Maybe it has the same fate as “impressionism”—which was coined as a satiric term by the journalist Louis Leroy in reference to a painting by Monet” (personal communication, 2012).

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