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The Essay In The Postmodern Era

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The Essay In The Postmodern Era

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
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Xiqiao Wang

ABSTRACT

The overarching goal of this study is to suggest that the essay as a genre, although seeming to manifest the epistemological conceptions of the modern, possesses certain qualities from its origin that justify and strengthen its position in the paradigm of the postmodern condition. It is my argument that misconceptions about such qualities have led to its mistreatment by writing teachers in accordance with two dominate pedagogical approaches, formalism (current-traditionalism) and romanticism (expressivism). My argument requires a detailed examination of the political, historical and cultural reality that cultivated and nurtured the genre of the essay, and a major focus of my study is on the way Montaigne conceived of the new mode of writing as his response to the new social realities of the sixteenth century, an age marked by discoveries and inventions.

To justify this approach, I consider works by composition theorists who promote an agenda of critical literacy, scholarly works on Montaigne's essays, as well as various relevant works on postmodernism and literary theory. Perhaps more importantly, I look back to the chaotic, unpredictable, and skeptical mentality of the sixteenth century and attempt to draw connections between that time period and the present, as our present

postmodern era is also marked by major shifts of conceptions about reality, knowledge, authority, and the self.

From this framework, I indicate connections can be drawn between the two revolutionary ages, both marked by explosion of new knowledge and dissipation of authority and certainty. It is my proposition that the essay, arising from the need to question traditions and to adapt to new emerging realities, possesses qualities—explorative, skeptical, and dialogical—that procure a valid position in the ongoing questioning and challenging of the Modern by the Postmodern. Finally, I examine how essay has been and continues to be taught just for its formalistic merits and ignored for its epistemological, aesthetic, and philosophical values, an examination that serves to repudiate the wrongful relegation and dismissal of the essay and to establish a justification of not only the literary merits, but also the pedagogical values of the essay.

CHAPTER ONE

Shifts, Concessions, and Turmoil

As Lester Faigley and Susan Romano articulated in their article the ongoing argument that computer networks disrupted assumptions about advanced literacy, they also urged writing programs to take seriously students' demand for an education they perceive as relevant to the twenty-first century, as opposed to the nineteenth (57). Their argument represents an attempt to subvert the framework of writing programs across the country, whose curriculums and pedagogies are based on a series of assumptions about essayistic literacy. What they are challenging, however, goes beyond the legitimate position of essayistic literacy in writing programs as the backbone of writing instructions. Their questioning not only attempts to problematize the aim of such writing practices—the production of texts characterized by appropriate length, personal integrity and engagement, and conceptual unity and complexity—but also raises valid interrogations of the agenda of literacy (or literacies), the doubtful status of Western literary tradition in current humanity departments, and the goals and implications of liberal education in American colleges and universities.

It is their address of such concerns that makes what writing programs do meaningful on both pedagogical and epistemological levels. In their effort to position the goals and obligations of writing programs in the macro-framework of liberal education, they locate and examine in American colleges and universities the center of conflicts and

quarrels between Postmodern context and the long-ingrained “meta-narratives” of Modern society. According to these composition theorists, as well as many others, the introduction and proliferation of computer networks and postmodern social-political context call for the ascension of network literacy and repudiation of essayistic literacy. Faigley and Romano advocate different types of writing tasks that are characterized as terse in content, colloquial and dialogical in style, most often single-drafted and immediately responsive to exigencies, and much more dependent on humor and pathos when relating to audiences. Underlying such an advocacy for an expansion of network literacy in the curriculum is an important skepticism toward the traditional goals and rationale of liberal education, the authority of self-evident canon of humanistic thought and texts, and Modern metanarratives of knowledge and institutions constructed by modernist epistemological assumptions.

Misconceptions of Writing-As-Process

The curriculum turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, with its shifts, concessions and experiments, found its voices in writing programs forged from debates and agreements among a variety of approaches towards writing curriculum and instruction. These different approaches found common ground in their attempt to understand learning to write as a process of gradual acquisition of the functional literacy of writing. Nevertheless, the predominate approaches to teaching, although professing to be process-oriented, still focused on the acquisition of skills. To this day, most pedagogies treat the learning of writing as a gradual and progressive mastery of basic skills by the students.

Teaching of writing can then be summarized as the scientific analysis, synthesis, generalization, and modeling of basic skills in order to demonstrate the merits of “good” writing. Despite the contribution and accomplishments of the process movement, it is my contention that writing as process is not and has not been one of the dominate approaches to teaching writing. Instead, the formalism (current-traditionalism) and romanticism (expressivism) predominated over the decades. Of these two, expressivism is presented as a process pedagogy, but I believe it lacks some of the basic features of writing as process. As a result, when criticism are lodged against the so-called process paradigm, these criticism actually have mostly to do with formalism and current-traditionalism and little to do with what Writing-as-Process pedagogy tried to articulate.

A Back-to-Content backlash against the process movement in the 1980s called for a restoration of the humanities and the reestablishment of the canon of Western literature and culture. It also signaled a shift away from process-oriented, skill-acquisition-motivated, cognitive-developmental approaches to curriculum and instruction in writing classrooms. Cultural literacy proponents such as Bennett and Hirsh campaigned for a content-based curriculum as they erroneously accused the process movement as participating in the larger formalistic and pragmatic undergraduate curriculum reformation in the 1960s and 1970s, when, according to Bennett and Hirsh, colleges turned out students who could read, write, work a computer, and find jobs, but are not equipped with an basic understanding of the political, cultural, artistic achievement of Western tradition and, thus, are not liberally educated. Bennett and Hirsh believed that the process movement helped the erosion and deterioration of the broad humanizing goals

of the liberal arts by focusing just on the “teachables” and the scientific aspects of writing and thus losing sight of the socially-constructed and dialogic nature of all writing activities.

The critiques of the writing pedagogies often focus on their formalistic approach to teaching of writing. Hirsh, for one, attempts to locate the source of the crisis in the formalistic pedagogies. For him, teaching skills independently of content by emphasizing the phonetic, lexical, syntactic, heuristic, and rhetorical skills has ignored the tacit cultural knowledge that determines the content of composition product. According to cultural literacy proponents, effective communication through reading and writing depends as much on the store of background knowledge readers and writers bring to a text as the formal techniques of composing process. Formalistic pedagogy’s focus on the studying, imitating, and reinventing of models of good writing does not help to serve these ends because it makes the teaching of writing a formal, technical, and procedurally unmediated process.

In their efforts to address this crisis of “cultural literacy” and to move back to content, Bennett and Hirsh both tried to assemble lists of books and items of cultural information students should read and know in order for them to acquire an understanding of the political, cultural, and artistic achievements of the great Western tradition. But in Hirsh’s attempt to justify this reemphasis on content and restoration of canon, he is more concerned with the failure of formalistic pedagogy to promote political and cultural integration, claiming that the formalistic pedagogy facilitates an exclusion of culturally illiterate students from the democratic arena of public discourse that articulates the

purpose of our society. Students who lack the cultural literacy to communicate about complex issues are walled out of a “full citizenship and full acculturation into our society” (36). His call for a return of the canon of Western culture to the center of liberal education, however, is not free from controversy because the very “central traditional materials” he promotes are seen by postmodern theorists as a by-product of the modern hegemony of state power that overturns not only local traditions and dialects, but also private and communal lives. It is exactly the modern politics of the authority of knowledge and its institutions that authorize and legitimate such a unified body of knowledge that need to be questioned and problematized under postmodern conditions.

The concessions, shifts and turmoil of over four decades in composition studies, each epoch of which is represented by a unique way of translating the responsibilities of writing programs into pedagogies and movements in terms of a broad conception of liberal education and ideology, help to articulate the transformation of the social conditions and ideologies of the respective decades. The arguments, debates, and complexities within composition studies can be seen as mirroring the sometimes tumultuous changes in ideologies. Within the same circumstances, the essay, as a literary genre and teaching material for composition classrooms, has had its own victories, defames, and catastrophes.

CHAPTER TWO

The Postmodern Reality

Liberal Education in Postmodernity

Assumptions involved in the shift from modernism to postmodernism that typifies American society and the current thought and reformation of composition studies and pedagogies can be examined with the reference to the back-to-content movement. .

John Trimbur, for one, suggests in that the roots of the discourse of crisis in liberal education “reach deeper than economic trends or generational styles” (24), involving a wider crisis in knowledge and its institutions. Trimbur argues that the traditional goals of liberal education have lost their power and legitimate status because the world in which we live in has changed to a place where not a single self-evident canon of humanistic thought and texts can be restored at the heart of the curriculum. Thus, Trimbur contends, writing programs should respond to the drastic change of epistemological conceptions accompanying a different social reality. The postmodern reality Trimbur refers to denies any absolute truth and certainty and heartily welcomes the coexistence of knowledges and authorities in their plural forms. This recognition of a radical plurality of knowledge which typifies postmodernism, comes as the result of an ever-increasing awareness of the diversity in human cultures, which typifies a postmodern epistemological framework. Postmodernism invites a multiplicity of thought, encouraging an open acceptance of a diversity of frameworks, the juxtaposition of

different perspectives and voices, and the contemplation of the connections and associations of different conceptual schemes and ideas. Such a multiplicity undermines the idea of a general consciousness where a hierarchical structure of perspectives privileges a unified body of knowledge that can claim the central position of a curriculum as canon. As a result of this acceptance of multiplicity and refusal of unified authority, postmodernism casts doubts on the possibility of any “universal” truth.

Trimbur suggests an alternative approach to “the canon,” one that defamiliarizes “authoritative” interpretations of the great Western works and questions the “Truth” that resides in such works (28). To demystify the canon by “leading students to see that the authority of the canon does not reside in the works that compose it but rather in the ways we have developed to talk about it, the reasons we give for studying it, and the social arrangements that locate it in historical and cultural context and make it meaningful” (29), teachers of literature present an honest recognition of the uncertain and dialogic nature of literature and composition. No longer regarding themselves as the possessor and transmitter of fixed “Truth” and knowledge, teachers can begin to see themselves as comparatively equal participants in a dynamic discourse that is characterized by diversity and plurality. Students, on the other hand, will no longer see themselves as inheritor of a permanent tradition and are empowered to get engaged in the ongoing dialogue that recognizes the equal coexistence of cultures, which constantly reconstitutes and reinstitutionalizes knowledge and Truth.

According to the French philosopher of postmodernism, Jean Francois Lyotard, “an incredulity toward metanarratives” typifies the postmodern mentality toward the

modern. As a result of the questioning of the previously self-evident and self-justified account of knowledge that determines the goals and practices of liberal education, the present crisis of liberal education is a reflection of the state of disbelief toward the two main accounts of knowledge in metanarratives: that of enacting a history of freedom in the name of secular humanism, reason, and science; and that of unifying knowledge and realizing philosophical truth through overcoming the disciplinary dispersals. In this chain of actions, social material realities determine what constitutes knowledge, a shift of perception that necessitates adapting the goals and practices of liberal education.

The dissipation of traditional conceptions of knowledge and its institutions is only one of the numerous phenomena that accompany the partial transition from modernism to postmodernism we are witnessing and participating in. Trimbur argues that these new conceptions of epistemic institutions and new ways of thinking and acting arise out of the changed circumstances of our lives and our attempts to adapt to them. Such changed circumstances can be described in American cultural and social reality as such: the unprecedented expansion and democratization of higher education and the growing connections among universities, government, and the corporate world (nationally and internationally); the globalization of economy and commerce as a result of new corporate developmental strategies and policies; and the formation of the global village as a result of new communication and transportation technologies. Accordingly, the traditional role of higher education to prepare liberal elites to fulfill the two metanarratives of knowledge in the modern era is no longer sustained or guaranteed by the quickly dissipating

institutions. As a result, the mission of the university is bound to change with the rest of the world.

Knowledge, Self, Responsibility, and Authority

The notion of knowledge as discursively constructed by the voices of multiple and internally contradictory individuals underscores that knowledge conveys only partial and temporary truths in the writing classroom. Such a conception foregrounds tremendous pedagogical innovations that are rhetorical, collaborative, and democratic in nature. In “*Postmodern Pedagogy in Electronic Conversations*”, Marilyn M. Cooper echoes Lester Faigley’s call for a more in-depth theorization of the network pedagogy that arises from the use of electronic discussions in writing classroom. Both Cooper and Faigley regard electronic writing as the most effectively attentive to shifts to postmodern assumptions. As a result, both scholars consider network literacy to be superior to other literacies, especially the essayistic literacy, because network literacy is the most reflective of the multilayered “postmodern” dimension of writing. But the irony of their argument lies in their refusal to recognize the possibility of the coexistence of genres and pedagogies in a single paradigm. By not only prioritizing one literacy over the rest, but also polarizing electronic/hypertextual/postmodern against general print/literate/modern modes of teaching writing, some postmodern composition theorists do not allow for the existence of multiple voices and perspectives. The repudiation and the necessity to legitimate the essay is just a result of such intolerance.

According to Cooper, the postmodern condition, when applied to modify and constrain the practices of teaching writing, involves a transition in assumptions in at least four areas—“a transition in assumptions about knowledge, language, and the self, a transition in assumptions about power, a transition in assumptions about responsibility, and a transition in assumptions about the teacher’s role in the classroom” (143). In addition to the dissolution of a modernist notion of knowledge as the “apprehension of universal truth and its transparent representation in language by rational and unified individual,” postmodernism also brings under question the romantic conception of the authorial self that can seek allegiance with universal truth and achieve unified identity through contemplation (144). This romantic notion of “intellectual self-realization” stems from the Platonic philosophical conception of beauty and art—that individual thinkers move toward the discovery of universal truth and beauty and live in line with ideal “forms” through a contemplative process. In this way, the “self” is a stable and coherent identity. Understood in the context of the postmodern condition, however, the self moves toward the discovery of the diversity of cultures through upfront confrontations of the self with the diversity, a process where the self is forced to occupy different positions and to negotiate conflicting ideas and various perspectives. This socially-constructed nature of knowledge and self also poses serious challenges toward the romantic conception of language as a transparent window that mediates the unified self and permanent truth.

By endowing upon the self and language the power of partially constructing meanings, identity, and discourse, postmodern theory breaks down traditional power relations in classrooms. If knowledge is not a stable construct possessed by teachers and

passed to students, the basis for teacher-centered classroom practices is threatened; and when knowledge is seen as socially constructed and pluralistic, with the self and language seen as contributing to this construct, both teachers and students are allowed to participate in this process as equals. Postmodern analysis of power relationships by Michel Foucault challenges the notion of power as possession and suggests that dominance in power relationships arises from relations and actions among all participants. Through a continuous modification of their actions that impact others' actions, each individual shares the responsibility of structuring a temporary and fluid power relationship that is constantly subject to change. Power in the postmodern classroom is not "possessed" by the teacher, nor can it be "given up" or "given" to the students. Each different teaching situation sets up one possibility among a range of possibilities, which produces a certain pattern of teacher-student actions that impact each other and constitute a temporary power relationship that is specific to the given situation.

For Faigley and Cooper, an electronic writing situation is different from a traditional essayistic one because electronic writing classroom provides a different range of possibilities of actions for students and teachers, through which an ongoing situation is constructed through a chain of actions that mutually impact each other. Student-centered teaching practices arise not from the "sharing" or "giving" of power on the teacher's side, but through this different pattern of power relations. In a traditional classroom, where teacher-student identity and institution are fossilized, students are forced to occupy roles that classroom politics prepare for them—usually passive recipients of knowledge who are subject to a single absolute authority, the teacher, who possesses all the power. But in

an electronic instruction classroom, which, according to Cooper and Faigley, emulates a postmodern culture, students have more freedom to choose or refuse to take up roles prepared by the teacher, and more frequently they act upon such freedom to initiate, define, modify, and change their positions according to the ongoing actions. Through these changes of actions, a more democratic and equal power relation pattern is established where each individual agency assumes the responsibility and obligation for one's course of action and its impact on others.

Here arises a fear some writing teachers have toward electronic writing situation, and more importantly, a fear toward the constantly transient shifts of identities in a postmodern condition. The fear of the loss of meanings arises from a modernistic assumption that universal truth and enduring values exist and need to be approved by external authorities. When no such universal ethical codes or external authority are to be found, it is feared that people who are not coerced to abide by any moral principles would behave irresponsibly. Cooper here uses French philosopher, Zygmunt Bauman's conception of responsibility as grounded on a "pre-ontological impulse to be responsible for the Other" (151) as opposed to seeing responsibility as externally imposed ethics. Bauman's thesis is that it is the very need for individual significance and subjectivity, not the force from external authority, that obliges each individual to respond to the Other. Cooper advances Bauman's notion of morality that refuses to conceive of the individual as an isolated entity that is absorbed in self-interest, emphasizing instead the fundamental sociality of humanity. It is through the action of being responsive to Other that each

social entity establishes its irreplaceable individuality and independent subjectivity, thus becoming a social agent whose existence matters and imposes significance upon society.

Responsibility for Other in writing classrooms, when explained with modernist assumptions, can be seen as students' being compelled or habituated by social institution and their previous education to comply to the rules set up by the teacher. This subjection to power and authority is conveniently considered as interest-oriented: those who do what the teacher tells them to do get good grades. This assumption, however, does not provide a sound basis for students' active engagement and truly motivated participation in writing activities. Postmodern theory, however, would rather see such a motivation as derived from neither self-interest nor forced subjection to institutional forms of power relation pattern, but a sincere need to be responsive and responsible for the teacher, other students, and the task itself. If we assume responsibility as an obligation to the Other and not a submission to authority, our students become independent agents who listen to, recognize, and respect differences and are willing to contribute to diversity and plurality of the classroom. Postmodern theory suggests that teachers acknowledge these notions of morality and put more trust in students' moral self-conscience in such a way as to motivate their consideration and sense of responsibility for the influence their actions have on others. When teachers encourage each student writer to consider his/her self as a member of a discourse that is multiple, competitive, and fluid that helps to constitute, modify, and mold the individual identity, teachers concurrently identify themselves no longer as the authority in classroom, but as facilitators of the constituting process.

The teacher in a postmodern classroom, according to Cooper, “will not try to set standards, lay down the law, or take responsibility themselves for everything that goes on” (157). While this “loss” of authoritarian role can make teachers “powerless” and uneasy, Cooper suggests that instead of a complete submission of controlling power in classroom, teachers should be able to take advantage of the postmodern classroom condition and help students to “learn how to be open to unassimilated otherness, learn how to take responsibility for others, and learn how paratactic juxtaposition of ideas and perspectives can lead to a better understanding of issues and problems that confront them” (157). Cooper believes this type of postmodernist teaching leads to a more democratic teaching-learning environment, where teacher responsibility and student responsibility are balanced.

According to Ira Shor and other practitioners of the kind of teaching practices Cooper describes, teachers should pose generative questions that motivate students’ reflection on daily experiences helps to sort out from the myriad of complexities that stands out as important. It’s important for the teacher to listen to such complexities, to grasp the significant themes in these diverse experiences, and to represent these complexities as in relation to the central problem. It is during such a re-presenting process that students become aware of complexities and diversities within their own discourse, and the teacher, as the facilitator, helps to make the relation between the ordinary (complexities within students’ discourses) and the extraordinary (the contradictory and complicated problem) visible to the students. While fulfilling such a responsibility, Cooper cautions that the teacher should also be very careful when offering

his/her perspective in order to avoid an imposition of any specific and seemingly authoritative view that must be adhered to or a pronouncement of a single perspective as the only correct one, the “official” line to take on a problem. As Cooper suggests, drawing from Foucault, intellectuals and teachers should take the role of facilitator in “helping students become conscious of the complexities of the problems that face them”; however, “they cannot legitimately or effectively impose their own hypotactic structuring of the problems on students” (159).

The postmodern condition entails a new set of assumptions that enables us to perceive the teaching environment from whole new perspective. The shift of assumptions about authority, knowledge, self and other lends strengths to the postmodern theorists’ interrogation of the past pedagogies in writing classroom. Nevertheless, in their attempt to transform the writing classroom in such a radical way that it keeps pace with the rest of the world, however, their privileging of network literacy as the only applicable mode against any other traditional genre may seem overly zealous and even rash.

Redefining Literacy

The postmodern transition of assumptions about knowledge, authority, self, and responsibilities raises questions about the current ontological status, curricular arrangement, and pedagogical implications of composition programs all over the country. In “*Beyond Imagination*”, Lester Faigley, for one, insists that two questions need to be answered before teachers and administrators can respond to the urging demand of postmodern conditions, manifested in our reality that is daily modified by network

technology. First, what do we want our students to learn (redefining literacy)? Second, how do we create the best learning environments for our students (pedagogical consideration)?

Given the socially-constructed nature of literacy, our reality, which is marked as an information explosion age, dictates a fundamental redefinition of literacy and educational goals. A redefinition of literacy that is contingent upon our current social reality demands a new agenda for not only writing teachers, but also for educators in general: we want students to be able to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize vast amount of information available, to value the breadth of information, to be able to utilize and assimilate such information, to communicate in a variety of discourses, and to participate in the knowledge-constructing process. And last of all, students are to become responsible citizens and community members who understand the ethical, cultural, and social values of the discourses they are positioned in.

Given the unique strength of network technology in storing and juxtaposing information that is easily manipulated by a user's sorting and synthesizing, it seems only logical to argue that it's time to mark the literacy agenda of postmodern condition as technological, and it is then time for technology-facilitated classrooms, which promote and correspond to postmodern reality, to replace the traditional classroom setting and its pedagogical practices. According to Faigley, the "best possible learning environment with technology" shows its strengths in producing student-centered and collaborative learning environment, encouraging student-teacher interaction, and promoting students' higher achievement, self esteem and motivation for learning ("*Beyond Imagination*"138).

It seems that it is inevitable and necessary to make a full acknowledgement of the new age and to remove all the by-products of modernistic classroom.

Unfortunately, the essay, as a genre of the modern, falls under the category that is to be discarded. For many zealous advocates of network literacy, a shifting away from the essay to multimedia websites is risk-free and necessary—just one minor pedagogical modification, where no epistemic or aesthetic values of the genres need to be evaluated and questioned, nor do the pedagogical implications of the vast change to be considered and interrogated. It is unfair, however, to remove a genre from the literacy agenda of one era just because such a genre has been used to mark the literacy and educational issues of the previous era. Without a fair treatment and exploration into the features of the genre and the underlying assumptions that make its historical emergence, the decision to remove the essayistic literacy is fundamentally scarred with irresponsibility and negligence. It is necessary to free the essay from a historically ingrained confusion over what it is and then observe what essay can be in a postmodern writing classroom.

CHAPTER THREE

“Essaying to be”

Discoveries and Transitions of the Renaissance

Montaigne states in his famous notice “To the Reader” in the 1580 edition of “*Essais*” that he considers himself the subject of his book; that he intends to portray his true natural form with its imperfections and defects; that it is only the respect to social conventions that prevents him from presenting to the public the “entire and wholly naked” self. (*Complete Essays*, 2) Montaigne takes every opportunity to express, elaborate and comment on his intentions, desires, and obsessions to “portray himself to life” and to represent things as they are. The essay, a new genre invented by Montaigne, provided a prose composition that was particularly suited to the self’s pursuit of self-affirmation through a careful examination and problematization of the the encounter between the individual and the discourse that determines and modifies the individual’s point of view. By examining features of the essay that distinguish it as a revolutionary genre that arises from the historical, cultural, philosophical and literary traditions of the Renaissance, we can better articulate the spirit of discovery that marks its particular historicity and justifies its legitimate position in a postmodern epistemological paradigm.

The emergence of the essay as a new genre is associated with something that was taking place throughout Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth century—an awakening and response to the impact of Renaissance scientific inventions and

discoveries, and an unsettling sense of uncertainty toward preconceived and received notions of not only astronomy, science and geography, but also theology, cosmology and epistemology. Advancements in observational astronomy proved Copernicus' hypothesis that the earth was the center of universe wrong and established the new theory that the earth revolved around the sun. As a result, solid religious and cosmological notions of human existence based on the traditional ideas were shattered. Invention and application of the mariner's compass, the printing, and the telescope made possible human circumnavigation of the world and then the geographical discovery of America. Such endeavors captured human imagination not simply with promises of political and commercial fulfillment, but also with visions of a new world. A zealous revival of ancient wisdom of Greek and Rome, the restoration of lost languages, and the editing and dissemination of lost texts and knowledge also carried its full impact well into the seventeenth century.

The spirit of discovery necessitated by scientific evidence that threatened the traditional notions and conceptions of human existence elevated itself into a whole new mode of thought and discourse that defines the Renaissance. Renaissance is an age replete with discoveries and inventions that had a powerful and profound impact on our vision of the self, the earth, and the universe. Long-lasting debates between philosophers and poets with their ingrained beliefs and scientist with their mounting evidence marked a sense of uncertainty towards cosmological and epistemological issues that could not be settled by political propaganda or persecution, leading to a thorough examination of received opinions and notions of heaven and earth. The urgency to locate human's

position in a shattered conceptual framework of the universe also makes the establishment of a new order from the ruins of the ancient inevitable and necessary.

The new discoveries, which so successfully diminished the validity of the old order, however, failed to provide a solid ground on which stable new cosmological and epistemological structures could be established to sort out the rising complexities into a new logical and orderly fashion. New inventions and discoveries were subjected to frequent revisions and modifications in light of infinite possibilities introduced by explorations. Knowledge, shifting and elusive, allowed brief glimpses into its tentative nature. Like our postmodernist era, the Renaissance experienced shifting of assumptions about knowledge and truth without any sense of full disclosure due to the fact that Renaissance scientists could no longer rely on classical authorities for explanations of the ways that things were. Nor could they rely on the tautological system of Aristotle or the Ciceronian scholasticism for an effective inquiry into the order of things. When they started to alter the inherited patterns of explanations in light of new discoveries, they were also ready to break away from the dominion of classical authority, and a new mode of empirical research grounded in experience rather than pure deductive or inductive argument was soon to be appearing on the emerging Renaissance discourse agenda.

In the face of shattered authorities, conflicting claims, and uncertainty about the nature of human knowledge, truth in any realm is no longer attainable through a careful assimilation of received notions and theoretical deduction and induction, but has to be sought after through exploration of internal and external experiences. If the world eludes certainty and stability, the proper stand for the philosopher is to doubt everything, especially the notion that an individual can count on reason and sense-evidence for a

comprehension of truth. From this particular history, a new genre, a mode of inquiry, a new style of prose that bears the same spirit of discovery and invention that marks the Renaissance arose: the essay. “Essaying” was conceived as a mode of discovery, facilitating exploration into a world in flux for new ideas and new insights.

Tentative Understanding of the Essay

According to discourse theorist Michael L. Hall, the emergence of the essay provided a new mode of composition that particularly suited the needs of Renaissance minds to articulate their fascination with the implications of the new philosophy and the new discoveries. This novel written discourse allowed the writer to think freely outside the constraints of traditional rhetorical formulas and dictating authorities. At a time when Ciceronianism and old doctrines of philosophy dominated the rhetorical domain of prose composition, Montaigne’s claim in “Of Experience” that he sought to portray in his language “the progress of my humors, that every part be seen or remembered distinguished, as it was produced” (*Complete Essays*, 187), carries the same spirit of discovery and invention, and manifests the same doubt and uncertainty toward “authority” and human understanding. Montaigne, the skeptic philosopher and the inventive writer, positioned himself to break away from the conventional mode of argument that depends on the classical domain for authority and relies on the tautologous system of Aristotle and the scholastics for logical coherence. It is through his invention of a recursive and infinitely progressive mode of “essaying” that Montaigne attempts to reconcile his fundamental epistemological skepticism and his assiduous pursuit after tentative knowledge.

Montaigne's *Essais*, when considered for its literary values, does carry a different epistemological agenda from its literary predecessors. No stable, immutable and permanent world of "form" of Plato, or the idea of an ultimate "One" that is the source of all matters and beauty for Plotinus exists in Montaigne's conception of the world. In fact, the discovery of the New World and the new stars unsettled the Renaissance world view and challenged the core notions of Medieval science and religion, which are based on the totalitarian notion that a Christian hermeneutics—a fourfold interpretive system—can be referred to for a model of the corporeal world. The existence of such totalitarian notions, be it the world of "form," the "One," or the "scripture" that explains all physical objects and phenomena, provided a source of certain and stable truth and knowledge that philosophers and poets could rely on. It was through their efforts to imitate, emulate, and articulate certain knowledge that poets of the ancient times constructed meaning by what they do; it was also the very certainty that justified and accounted for the values of poetry and literature.

The meaning of the word "essay" itself reveals its experimental and tentative nature. Coming from the old French word *essai* that means "a trial, an attempt," the English word is defined as "A composition of moderate length on any particular subject, or branch of a subject; originally implying want of finish, but now said of a composition more or less elaborate in style though limited in range. The use in this sense is apparently taken from Montaigne, whose *essais* were first published in 1580" (Oxford English Dictionary). For Montaigne, the composing of the essay was an experiment, a try out, a test, even of one's own cognitive powers and limits. The word itself connotes a tentative,

progressive and groping method of gathering together anecdotes, memories, conjectures, beliefs, and wits for possible meaning-constructing.

What the reader observes in the early essay genre is a mind roaming in the realm of assumptions, conceptions, and opinions, stopping occasionally to reflect upon a relevant view point, and then moving on. Even the essayist was not very certain of the essay's thesis at the beginning of composing, nor at the end. The progressive and probing process, which involves such a complicated examination of and inquiry into the values and meanings of personal experience, conventional wisdom and received opinions, more often than not generate contradictions and conflicts rather than lead to a single valid agreement that corresponds to the author's intention and predetermines an authoritative interpretation. The explorative mind incessantly subverts and substitutes one conjecture with another, leaving plenty of space for controversies and contradictions without ever raising a definite thesis that "successfully" concludes the writing. If it is the author's choice, the progressive and recursive exploration on a topic can continue indefinitely. It is the desire for knowledge and tentative truth that motivates the endless pursuit, but it is the epistemological skepticism towards any claim for ultimate and absolute truth that prevents the author from forming a stable and certain opinion towards an issue.

In the essay "Of Sadness or Sorrow", for example, the reader notices that Montaigne rarely argues for a thesis and he often digresses from a "logical" elaboration on his topic as dictated by Aristotelian syllogism. He never attempts to establish logical coherence among the multi-perspectives that evolve around his subject--anecdotes from history and personal experience, allusions to and quotations from classical authors, and commonly accepted philosophical assumptions. If the statement he makes at the

beginning should be considered as the thesis of the essay—"I am one of those freest from this passion. I neither love nor regard it," the anecdotes that follow of Psamneticus—a king of Egypt and the story of a prince can be very disturbing in the sense that they do not serve as proofs or unquestioned authority to support and confirm this thesis.

Psamneticus, who endures the degradation of his daughter and execution of his son with undaunted countenance, but "manifest(s) extreme grief" at the sight of a friend hailing as a captive, explains that the last incident can be relieved by tears, but the first two incidents far surpass any power of expression and so can not be relieved by tears. From this example, Montaigne concludes that tears and excess of grief lead to the passionate release of emotions. Such a conclusion subverts the conception of sorrow and fear as "foolish and base" and explicitly contradicts the conjecture Montaigne makes immediately after, that tears help to dilute the violent passions of grief. After such an examination of the nature of sorrow and fear by presenting contradictory evidence and conflicting cases, Montaigne rather curiously shifts his discussion to love and joy that can cause the same violent passion. He explores the topic by presenting examples from lore and literature, anecdotes and classical assumptions, but he never explicitly states his thesis, nor does he explain the purpose of his attempt. The conclusion at the end that he is "little subject to these violent passions" does echo his first statement, but can hardly be seen as the logical conclusion derived from the main body of his discussion consisted of anecdotes and allusions (*Complete Essays*, 6, 52, 54).

Reading of Montaigne is a discursive and progressive experience following a juxtaposition mode of exploration, not a definitive and formulated defining or persuading process following a predictable line of logic. Through a juxtaposition of parallel

examples that rarely subordinate themselves to a single governing assumption, Montaigne's essay circles around the topic but never concludes it. Each example initiates a tentative conjecture and awaits immediate subversion by the following set of examples and conjectures.

As we read in Montaigne's "Of Repenting":

I can not keep my subject still. It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness. I take it in this condition, just as it is at the moment I give my attention to it. I do not portray being: I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another, or, as the people say from seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute... This is a record of various and changeable occurrences, and of irresolute and, when it so befalls, contradictory ideas: whether I am different myself, or whether I take hold of my subjects in different circumstances and aspects. So, all in all, I may indeed contradict myself now and then; but truth, as Demades said, I do not contradict.

(Complete Essays, 611)

Montaigne's discursive combination of the received knowledge of his age, which is seen by him as false and inaccurate, and his own empirical summary of personal experiences enacts a process of the writer attempting to describe and picture the flux and uncertain reality of the real world.

Meanwhile, by turning both outward and inward for knowledge and truth, Montaigne was also forced to conclude that the self is as uncertain, as elusive, and as protean as the outside world. His discovery of himself proves to be full of surprises since

the better he knows of the subject--the self, "the less do I comprehend myself." The essay is the writer's response to the world that has become problematic and is still keeping changing from moment to moment. In the process of discovering and enacting such changes in personal writing, the writer accomplishes a momentary realization of the self even as it is passing from day to day and from moment to moment.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Recording the Natural Mode of Thought”

“Matter” and “Manner”

It is obvious that Montaigne invented the term and the genre for his own prose style, which later inspired and motivated many authors and gradually came to be applied to a much broader category that includes any composition that fails to be included in other more clearly defined genres. The essay arose as a revolutionary invention of a new mode of rhetoric and discourse that confronts the conventional and familiar. Seen as a novelty discourse at the time, which adopts methods and ideas that are unfamiliar and elusive to the reader, Montaigne’s essays have been seen as fundamentally formless, unstudied, and spontaneous. Montaigne himself announces that what he puts on paper is the same as a simple and natural speech, “far removed from affectation, free, loose, and bold,” and thus the author himself is just an objective observer detached from the situation. For those who accuse Montaigne of writing formless and unmethodical composition, Montaigne’s own statement in “Of Friendship” that his compositions are

“antlike works, an monstrous bodies, patched and huddled up together of divers members, without any certain or well ordered figure, having neither order dependence, or proportion, but casual and framed by chance.”

seems to confirm their argument that it is through sheer “chance” that Montaigne randomly throw his thoughts and ideas together to represent the course of the writer’s capricious mind (*Complete Essays*, 130).

Montaigne was very explicit about what he perceives to be the essential qualities of his prose that defines and distinguishes itself from the elaborate rhetorical conventions of Ciceronian form of writing. “Matter” claims much more attention of the author than “art” in Montaigne’s prose because “words,” according to Montaigne, should “serve and waite upon matter” (*Complete Essays*, 25). The essay, regarded by Montaigne himself not as the products of art or study but an honest record of a mind reflecting upon a topic, can be taken as loosely structured, with each part standing comparatively independent of others, and the work in general in lack of logical cohesion and rhetorical symmetry. Each of such “divers members” seems to be thrown together in a random order—whichever appears first in mind comes first in the composition. It is easy to expel the essay from the literary studies and composition studies if the essay is seen as merely an approximation of the natural form of thought. Such an understanding of the essay, according to Renaissance scholar Graham Good, assumes that the composition product is an “honest” report of “actual thought which moves by association and intuition rather than strict logical order.” In other words, essay writing is pre-rhetorical, illogical, and not tempered by writer’s intention and any structuring efforts. In seeing Montaigne’s essay writing as “writing things down as they occur or emerge” without definite “set ‘frame’ or filter for discourse,” Good recognizes skeptical spirit of essay writing on a stylistic level (101). The set “frame” Good refers to ought to be the Ciceronian rhetorical tradition, with its

balanced clauses and studied formal symmetry, and the Aristotelian syllogism, which Montaignes intends to undermine in his “natural” mode of thought and composition.

Montaigne’s Rhetoric against the Classical

The author’s attempt to record and portray the very process of a mind exploring and pursuing after truth refuses the prescriptive rhetorical formula of composition that started as early as Aristotle and prevailed at Montaigne’s time. For Aristotle, rhetoric derives itself from occasions offered by civic life in Greece—an orator attempts to deliberate and decide the course of a future action, to persecute or defend past actions in order to determine the just resolution of an action, or to praise or blame someone or something without calling for any immediate action. It is obvious that in all three types of occasions the speakers seek to persuade or influence the beliefs of their audience, to change their course of action, and ultimately to implement and impose their values upon the public. Given the utilitarian and pragmatic goal of orations, all rhetoricians agree that the most efficient oration should follow a familiar mode of persuasion that prescribes means of persuasion, major divisions of argument, and general organization of the discourse. Even in today’s college writing classroom, we still find the manifestation of such prescriptions in the five-paragraph-paradigm for essay composition: we find in the opening paragraph *exordium* that states the main point and the largest divisions of the argument; we wish to see in the three body paragraphs the contrasts of ideas, *confirmatio* and *refutatio*; we also want the paper to be concluded with a *peroratio* that summarizes the argument and restates the main point. Advance planning and meticulous attention to form and shape in the process of composition is crucial under this paradigm.

Montaigne carefully disavows such assumptions of classical rhetoric and argues against a solely utilitarian conception of composition as a means of persuasion. He attempts to establish the essay as a different kind of discourse from an oration, as the essay allows space not just for persuasion and motivation for action, but also for spontaneity and sharing of private thoughts. In the process of composing, the essayist does not explicitly seek to accomplish anything as pragmatic as what the ancient rhetorician did, and it seems that there is no standard mode of development to be found to prescribe the division and form of the discourse.

Montaigne, who received systematic training in reading of Latin and ancient classics, is well aware of the Platonic notion *mimesis* and the notion of “the unity of action” in Aristotle even though he may not share with later new classical literary theorists’ reading of Aristotle as prescriptive rather than descriptive. Montaigne is certainly aware of the literary tradition of *mimesis*, starting from the notion of the poet as a mere imitator of appearances that is changeless in nature (Plato), or as an imitator and creator who takes a form from nature and reshapes it into a new medium of meaning governed by new principles and orders (Aristotle). In a sense, Montaigne’s *essais* is indebted to the notion of *mimesis* in that, as many Montaigne’s scholars argue, his essays portray a more “natural” form of thought than other literary genres. For Good, the fact that Montaigne does not filter, condense, substitute, delete, or refashion the elements of his thought to make them fit into the static formal stricture of the traditional rhetorical models, and that he allows his thought to associate and evolve more freely over time than is permitted by classical logic model, suggest that Montaigne’s composing embodies a more “natural” process and honestly represents “actual” thought patterns. Such a

proposition is problematic, however, if we take into consideration Montaigne's conceptions of truth, reality, and knowledge. For Plato and Aristotle, the poets attempt to grasp intellectual beauty through imitation of nature's way because nature embraces the ultimate knowledge and truth. But for Montaigne, when such a source of stable and universal truth is drained by the chaotic and disturbing reality, it seems only logical to argue that the philosopher turns inward for a comparatively stable source of meaning and that imitation of the "natural" thought process is an alternative way of grasping truth. The *mimetic* reading of Montaigne attempts to justify the "rambling development" of the essay by resembling it to a mode "typical of actual thought which moves by association and intuition rather than strict logical order." All the "digressions, false starts, circumlocutions" and "twist and turns of thought" manifest the normal thought pattern" (Good 100).

Unmethodical Method of Composing

Is Montaigne's essay writing really the embodiment of a thinking process that is uncontaminated by rhetorical designs? Is the spirit of Montaigne's essay writing "one of writing things down as they occur or emerge" without the "application of a preconceived method or structure"? If we acknowledge the writer's intention to be that of subverting the authority of classical rhetorical tradition and challenging received notions and assumptions, we ought to realize that Montaigne's "unrepressed thinking-writing" as Good puts it (Good 31), cannot possibly be just an honest record of the flow of thoughts put in writing, where no rhetorical design was imposed. It has long been noticed by Montaigne scholars such as O.B. Hardison that ever since the first publication of

Montaigne's *Essai* in 1580, major revisions and additions were added to the volumes with each of its editions, and the posthumous edition that serves as the basis of standard editions of the *Essais* until the twentieth century present some major changes from the first version (16).

The existence of such revisions reaffirms the assumption that Montaigne's composition is not unmethodical, pre-rhetorical and primordial record or natural thought process. The intention of the essayist dictates the use of rhetorical designs that find its philosophical roots in the sixteenth century reality. The seemingly undetermined and directionless exploration is an extension of Montaigne's skepticism towards human pretensions to systematic knowledge through reason. For literary theorist Lane Kauffmann, the fragmentary and experimental form of essay carries the polemical intents of the essay to reject the "identity principle upon which all systems are based—the epistemological assumption that their network of concepts mirrors the structure of reality, that subject and object of cognition are ultimately identical" (230). In other words, Montaigne refuses to subsume the individual experience beneath the ontological priorities of systems. Denying the privileges of the universal over the individual and historical, Montaigne refuses to surrender individual experience to the vain project of explaining the particular through the rigid universal logical or conceptual framework. By insisting on seeing himself and the world as equal identities that are inconsistent and contradictory in nature, Montaigne demonstrates in his essay a methodical discursive conveyance of a reality that is fragmented and discontinuous.

The essay is only unmethodical in the sense that it refuses to subordinate its elements to a unity of meaning that is accomplished through a foolproof deductive

sequence. But it is highly methodical in the sense that it gains its unity by arresting the conflicts that are inherent in the fragmented reality, by coordinating its internal elements to convey the feeling of movement and induce the experience of thought in the reader, and by rhetorically dismissing the pretense that thought could achieve total comprehension of its objects. One can no longer pretend that the essay expresses the discovery of a point of view that is based on chance and caprice. Nor can one degrade the ontological status of essay writing by identifying it with the *mimetic* practice of portraying the natural form of thought. The essay protests against and responds to the fragmentation of Modern life, where knowledge can only be gained through dialogues among different compartments of knowledge and the individual's momentary transcendence above the chaos. Through essay composing, the writer thinks about the unmethodical reality in the methodical way.

Montaigne's questioning of the epistemological, philosophical, and conventional framework of the previous age echoes the same interrogation the postmodern age impose upon the modern agenda. By protesting against the unified universal "system" that can be used to explain the world and emphasizing the individual and historical, Montaigne accomplished something that the postmodernist has been attempting: the interrogation of authority, the elevation of marginalized and subordinated voices and perspectives against the universal and hegemonic, and the reconception of the self and its power relationship with the other and the world. Montaigne's emphasis on the fragmentary and uncertain nature of the reality responds to the same uncertainty that typifies the postmodern condition.

CHAPTER FIVE

Quotations, References and Allusions

Juxtaposition of Voices and Perspectives

Montaigne's essays are engaging because he always amazes the reader with numerous recounts of stories, personal adventures, folklores, and intriguing anecdotes that seem to relate to each other but never really strike a point. Although the practice of using frequent quotations from and allusions to authorities was prevalent among Renaissance humanists who attempted to demonstrate and synthesize their knowledge about their favorite passages and familiar quotations from ancient and modern authors and incorporate their personal observations, it is clear that Montaigne's intention is to subvert received opinions through such a practice in his writings. He provides an open landscape where examples from various discourses, historical periods, and genres are generously supplied to agree, contradict, support, and subvert each other. Thus any single assumption is open to various interpretations, and the reader, when confounded and confused after a futile effort to see the "point" that does not exist, is encouraged to join the meditation process and to construct a unique comprehension of his/her own.

What we witness in Montaigne's progressive and subversive topic-exploration is the author's persistent struggle to negotiate his way through various tensions that problematize and complicate his writing. Such tensions in Montaigne's writings resist the

submission of his writing to a stable and restrictive mode of development that can be used to define the genre in any narrow sense.

The first tension is the rhetorical tension between Montaigne and his audience. Montaigne claims that he wishes to present to his readers a true and honest self essaying himself on the paper. Such a simple and truthful presentation that calls for elimination of any artistic intervention, however, is a carefully premeditated construct that is subtly immersed throughout his writing with sophisticated rhetorical techniques. Such tensions and complexities also deny any single interpretation of the meaning of an essay. The implication here is that essay writing is dialogic in nature—both the writer’s and readers’ comprehension of issues, debating and formation of opinions, and construction of meanings are enacted through numerous dialogues between the individual and communal, the internal and external, the writer and the audience, and among voices and perspectives that coordinate or subvert each other.

Second, the often confounding combination of the author’s personal experiences, anecdotes, and reflections with historical and classical assumptions universally acknowledged by the public are often deployed not as proofs of a certain notion, but as a point of dissonance where conflicts are raised but never resolved by the author. Critics of Montaigne, such as Paul Heilker, reveal to us Montaigne the radical who is preoccupied with “promulgation of radical thinking and writing.” According to such critics, Montaigne’s essays are a calculated “rebellious response to the rigidity of the dogmatic tracts which preceded it” (Heilker 21). They argue that, through such a calculated combination of contrastive and conflicting cases and evidence, Montaigne attempts to subvert not only received epistemological assumptions, but also the rationalistic

rhetorical tradition based on Aristotelian premises and axioms he inherited and worked within. This tension between the private and the public establishes and incessantly affirms Montaigne's conception of truth as temporary and uncertain.

Lastly, in Montaigne's frequent and adrift use of quotations, references, and allusions from authorities, we see the writer's attempt to enact his internal dynamics through the text and the circumstances surrounding the composition, and thus strive to reconcile the tension between the individual discourse and community discourse. A dialogic reading of Montaigne's essays reveals Montaigne the writer, not unlike any other individual writer, who is striving to subsume his individual subjectivity into the communal convention of the discourse community he seeks to belong to. To borrow James Porter's metaphor of the writer as a "collector of fragments, an archaeologist creating an order, building a framework, from remnants of the past" (35), we seem to find in the notion of "intertextuality" and "heteroglossia" a justification of Montaigne's abundant yet frequently "digressive" reference to historical anecdotes, classical assumptions, and his frequent quotations from both Modern and ancient writers.

The Idea of Intertextuality

The idea of intertextuality is closely associated with structuralism and poststructuralism. For postmodern theorists such as Michel Foucault all writing arises from a network of meaning constructed by other texts. They redefine the notion of "text," asserting that text is by nature intertextual, because a text always refers to other texts—its language system, its lexicon, its diction and grammar heavily immersed in its precursors; and an individual text relies on other texts for its own meaning. Porter argues that our

understanding of a text can only be achieved based on our comprehension of numerous texts that lend to the text its ideas, assumptions, beliefs, and arguments. In this sense, “The text is not an autonomous or unified object, but a set of relationship with other texts” (59). An intertextual reading of text repudiates the notion that the text can be regarded as an autonomous entity whose meaning is inherent in the text itself, completely subjected to the author’s intention or the reader’s isolated interpretation. Instead, we shift our attention away from the author and the text as individual entities and focus on the social contexts that produce and cultivate the text and the sources that shape, modify, and qualify the meaning of the text. Such a shift of focus qualifies the authors’ role in the construction of knowledge and meaning and attributes to the discourse and its community for a collective defining of individual work’s meaning.

Porter suggests two types of intertextuality that prevail and constitute the meaning of the text. Both can be found in Montaigne’s composing discourse. From this perspective, Montaigne’s quotations from and allusions to the classical authorities and his choice of topic of problematic and historical nature are manifestations of “iterability”—“repeatability of certain textual fragments.” As “Of Fear and Sorrow” demonstrates, these fragments are all pieces of other texts, be they from ancient philosophy, historical accounts of events, fictitious folklore, or just hearsay. Montaigne’s discourse is composed of such bits and pieces of fragments that the writer borrowed from references and combined in his text, which cooperate on the constitution of the text’s comprehensible meaning. An intertextual reading of text seems to impose on the writer the role Aristotle assigned to the poet—the one who imposes order on the events to create the best effect. The essayist’s creative power exists not in his ability in emulating divine inspirations in

his work, but in sewing together relevant but disparate and diverse elements in such a unique way that the text contributes to the discourse community not with individual genius or personal insights, but with the ingenuity of synthesizing and re-presenting knowledge. Thus the intertext, not the author, constrains writing and defines meaning.

Heteroglot and Dialogic

Here arises the relevance of Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of discourse as heteroglot to the analysis of the dialogic quality of essay composition. Bakhtin recognizes the unbridgeable gap between mind and world, which predetermines the uncertainty of every exigent moment when a writer starts to write. All writing starts from the problematic situation of the writer who seeks to differentiate—through joining and separating—the particularity of the individual subjectivity and the reality that precedes the self in existence, which is intertwined with everything else. For Bakhtin, existence is a shared experience that is dialogic in nature, and each present moment is not a static one, but a “mass of different combinations of past and present relations.” The Bakhtinian perception of the self as a “constantly potential site of being,” “a flux of sheer becoming” (37) appears very similar to Montaigne's perception of a self that is situated in uncertainty and flux and calls for constant defining. The “essaying” of the self is the very act of filling the gap between self and other through language that carries the similar implication as “I author myself”(28). Language and writing is affirmative in the sense that language provides the modeling pattern that helps subjectivity forge through the rule-driven, “generalizing centripetal forces of extra-personal system” (29) for a temporary and uncertain definition of self. The essay finds its strongest appeal in identifying

uncertainty as the fundamental quality of the genre. The essay's preoccupation with the uncertainty and fluidity of the writer's situation implies the possibility of transcending one's own subjectivity and acquiring a relative "consciousness."

Montaigne's "essaying" of self is the writer's effort to connect self to other through language, to define self through entering the discourse shared by other writers, and to equalize self with other through differentiating its own voice from the other. According to Bakhtin, such an accomplishment is based on the writer's mastery and control of language and discourse that are both heteroglot in nature. Bakhtin sees the language we use "filled to overflowing with other people's words, which are transmitted with highly varied degrees of accuracy and impartiality" (337). For Bakhtin, all users of language share a common stock of words, and each time we strive to a verbal or spoken expression, we refer to and compete with our predecessors for a unique ways of using the same stock of words. Meaning of our utterance is constructed insofar as it transcends the subjectivity of an isolated self and bonds with the experience, perceptions, and language of others. Positioning and locating the individual voice in the context of other voices is based on a continual interpretation of language of the discourse. We constantly recall, synthesize, evaluate, and even predict elements, such as earlier conversations, anecdotes, past experiences and things that are expected to be but not yet said, such as presupposition, referring to "assumptions a text makes about its referent, its readers and its context" that are not explicitly in the text (Porter 54). The heteroglot nature of discourse calls for such implicit or explicit interpretation of the language on the side of the writer, for it is in the very act of continuous interpretation that the writer struggles to accommodate self to other.

Critiquing Discourse Community Pedagogy

Poststructuralist views challenge the Romantic notion that writing is the single action of the writer and the meaning of the text is determined by the writer's will and knowledge. The reader, as passive receiver of such knowledge, is denied the power of text-interpretation and meaning-construction. A poststructural pedagogy is valuable in the sense that it challenges one of the prevailing composition pedagogies of its time, one emphasizing the autonomy of the writer, which is based upon the rather Romantic conceptions and views of art: that writers are enabled to compose and that writing is isolated and individual, not social and collaborative. Such a pedagogy requires the students to find the motivation for writing from inside, and good writing is marked by personal insight, originality, and autonomous voice. By romanticizing and emphasizing the autonomy of the individual writer, the traditional pedagogy is found by critics to be pessimistically deterministic. For those students who were not born with the talent to write—those who, unfortunately, constitute the majority of our students population—there is nothing writing teachers can do except for helping them to find the insight that was not inside. Such a pedagogy assumes that teachers have little ability to teach.

Intertextual pedagogy (discourse community pedagogy) suggested by Porter was initiated by David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell. These theorists believe that the primary responsibility of writing teachers is not to help students find inspiration, or what is already inside them, but to introduce to the students the conventions of a variety of discourse communities students may choose to join through their writing. Essay reading and imitating are easily faulted by such theorists in that such practices glorifies the

creativity and genius of individual essayists and overlooks the power of discourse production and the social nature of writing activities. These theorists shift the attention of writing teachers from the cultivation of the individual, internal, and inherent to the social, external, and instruction aspects of writing. An assumption of this pedagogy is that poor writers cannot produce competent discourse because they are not familiarized and immersed in an discourse community with its presuppositions, explicit and implicit conventions, existing conversations and expectations of newly coming members—the students. The goal of the writing teacher is thus to acquaint student writers with the conventions and assumptions of “Our” discourse.

It is very curious to observe that such a pedagogy that is oriented toward liberating our students from the constraints of the essay conventions ends up dictating a new sets of standards and criteria that are even more conventionally specific and rule-governed. To quote from Porter, “Acceptability . . . includes choosing the ‘right’ topic, applying the appropriate critical methodology, adhering to standards for evidence and validity, and in general adopting the community’s discourse values—and of course borrowing the appropriate traces”(43). By seeing a successful writer as a “creative borrower,” yet a writer who can contribute only to the “maintenance” of the definition of the community, we are subjugating each individual writer’s former knowledge, personal will, and individual choice to our own standard. In our effort to acquaint our students with “our” language, we run the risk of sacrificing the diverse and rich resources each individual student brings to our classroom: ethnic and cultural background, dialect and language habit, educational experience, and most important of all, the student’s own thoughts about what successful writing should be. It is even more ironic to see that these

theorists, who so firmly repudiate essay reading and appreciation, utilize essay for their own use. That is, as teachers, these theorists use essays to teach standard conventions of a genre. Essay reading is now fulfilling an important stage in the linguistic development of the writer. Good example of essays can now be used as models for imitation just for an acquisition of sophisticated linguistic skills.

Discourse, for Bakhtin, is also contextual, communal, and heteroglot in nature, but it is the very act of each user of language dialoguing with other members that defines the dialogic nature of discourse. The communal context for the conversation encompasses a broad territory. It can be the act of one individual writer or speaker struggling to make meaning through language and the context defining the use of language; it can be the dialogic relation between this individual with other users of the same language in one or any number of possible discourse communities; it can also be the language users' struggling and negotiating among different discourse communities through their effort to comprehend, accommodate, and modify each other. One aspect of the writer's engagement with the discourse community is the writer's struggle to locate the subjectivity of the self in the context of the discourse through language. Familiarity with discourse conventions and subordination of self to the communal standard are paramount at this stage. As Montaigne has shown us, however, the individual discourse is not simply confined and inhibited by the existing discourse conventions. Instead, the individual verbal construct continuously modifies discourse conventions through the authority and autonomy of individual consciousness that is impacted by and responds to other voices. According to Bakhtin, "One's own discourse and one's own voice, although born of

another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse" (339).

Montaigne's Negotiation with Discourse

The Bakhtinian view of the self in the infinite process of becoming through language recognizes the fluidity and temporality of discourse and fully acknowledges the constructive power of each individual participant. Montaigne's "essaying-to-be," when applied with Bakhtinian interpretation, implies a self acutely sensitive to the impulse of the individual subjectivity struggling to transcend the isolated meaning-construction; his abundant references and allusions to presuppositions, assumptions and pre-knowledge on the topic, on the other hand, reflect the self responding to the pressures of other voices. Montaigne is very aware of the complexity of the discourse and recognizes the limitation and uncertainty of his individual consciousness. Never fully trusting his own voice, but also refusing to submit to the authority of the discourse tradition, he seeks to balance and modify his personal perception with numerous allusions, quotations, and anecdotes. In Montaigne's essays, we witness a mind learning through navigating among voices that transcend geographical and historical localities. Montaigne engages himself with a variety of discourse communities that do not inhibit the self in pursuing personal knowledge through exploration in these territories, but subordinate themselves to the self by providing resources to substantiate and enrich a unique discourse marked by Montaigne's individual subjectivity. Be it Roman, Greek, Christian traditions, personal experiences, historical accounts, folklores, stories, religion, morality, or philosophy, the orchestration of voices in Montaigne's discourse helps to liberate the self and define the

personal, not to subjugate the self under discourse conventions. Through the navigation among the various modes of discourses, Montaigne also negotiates his shifting sense of self in its process of “becoming” through language.

The sense of “becoming” also implies that no ultimate and fundamentally stable assertion can be made to describe and standardize a discourse, thus none of the voices can be truly authoritative. Montaigne’s strategic juxtaposition of authoritative texts that contradict or confirm each other to substantiate his own discussion not only helps him to locate the self within the dialogue, but also equalizes all the members of the dialogic discourse. “Essaying to be” is the becoming of the individual writer, but more importantly, it is also the becoming of the heteroglot discourse that depends on each individual voice and perspective. Making of meaning through language does not legitimate certain users’ domination in the discourse. Some participants can be more powerful users of language than others, and the center of authority in the discourse may change, but the terms of any discourse are under constant pressure for revision with the formation of each assumption by any individual participant at any moment. The fluid and protean nature of discourse undermines the conception of authorities, be it the authority of classical traditions, genius of canonic essayists’ writings, or the defining power expert “insiders” within discourse communities.

CHAPTER SIX

Relegation and Justification of the Essay

Formalist and Romantic Approaches to Teaching Essay

Proponents of discourse community pedagogy reduce the essay as a genre to a series of fossilized forms to be imitated by beginner writers. For them, the essay has clearly definable forms that can be categorized into the narrative, the expository, the argumentative, or the descriptive. The underlying assumption of such classifications is that the essay is predictable and stable; the dialogic and explorative qualities of the essay are ignored. Once such classification of the “manner” of writing is institutionalized, “manner” no longer waits on “matter” as Montaigne intended in his essays. A formalistic pedagogy for teaching the essay in writing classrooms conveniently simplifies the complexity of essay writing, ossifies the fluid forms of essay into rigid, inflexible, and rule-driven model modes and formats, and polarizes self and other. The historical fragmentation between the essay of the Renaissance, which is later regarded as expository, and the “formal” essay deprives writers of a meaningful and constructive confrontation between self and context in the same discourse. The formal, usually the research mode, on the other extremity, presents the discourse as the vast and devouring territory of authoritative and objective truths, which threaten to subjugate and even diminishes the role of individual writers. Romantic, expressivist pedagogy, on the other hand excessively privileges the expressive inner self and minimizes intervention of

teachers—as well as any “other”—denying the dialogic aspect of the essay. The polarization between these two dominant pedagogies—formalism and Romanticism denies student writer the chance to explore through language their personal world and the discourse communities. Never encouraged to gain control of their own language and their perspectival comprehension of the world, students have been forced to abandon a genuine search for meaning, and writing is no longer the process of “becoming” that defines our existence.

Discourse-specific writing instruction fails to recognize the heteroglossia of discourse. Its insistence on the primacy of systematic thinking from within the definite boundaries of a single community is not compatible with Bakhtin’s and Montaigne’s conception of language as the representation of co-existence and interpretation of historical, social-ideological localities. By characterizing discourse communities as monolithic, closed unities independent of each other, discourse community pedagogy denies the validity of students’ home cultures. Indeed, students’ entry into a discourse community is at the price of their renunciation of their home culture. The premium placed upon the entry into community power opposes Montaigne’s belief that knowledge and human experience are not to be defined by any single linguistic, cultural, or philosophic community. For Montaigne, “few things touch me, or, to put it better, hold me; for it is right that things should touch us, provided they do not possess us” (*Complete Essay*, 864). For Montaigne, an essay writer utilizes and incorporates discourse-specific evidences and conventions to constitute and enhance exploration, and ultimately, to affirm the self, but the personal voice is never subjected to or dominated by the dictates

of a single discourse community. The formalist approach toward reading, teaching, and writing of the essay, as dictated by discourse convention pedagogy, is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of essay's generic features. It is also reasonable to argue that the accusation of the essay as an empty, oppressive, and outmoded genre is unjustified due to the fact that such an accusation is derived from problematic pedagogies of teaching the essay, not from a thorough understanding of the genre itself.

The Continuation of the Essay in the Postmodern

If we recognize the dialogic qualities of the essay—qualities that show us that exigency of writing is contingent on the circumstances of individual experience and contextual historicity, that essay writing is open to egalitarian multiplicity of voices, that writer is compelled to attain autonomy and control through language—we should not teach the essay as manifestations of sophisticated linguistic skills to be applied to standardized modes of crafting and organizing. Such a formalistic approach reduces writing to a mechanic action of imitation for preconceived ends. The origin of the essay as a flexible and fluid form of writing, with its combination of forms that shunned the rhetorical tradition, identified the genre as the means of searching after meaning, not as an end in itself. As a fluid means of writing, the essay reflects very sensitively the situation of writers actively responding to infinite and shifting contingencies of discourse, and the formal form their discourse takes is determined by the purposes of writers working in the multivoiced and temporary contexts.

Teaching essay-writing as a flexible and teachable approach to meaning-construction reconciles the expressive voice of the individual with the formalistic features of the rhetorical traditions of different modes of writing by offering a valid means for examining and shaping both. This dynamic and dialogic approach recognizes the temporality and uncertainty of any tentative resolution to a problematic situation; it encourages students to uncover sources of their dissonances and compare the personal perceptions against the perceptions of others. It opens up spaces within the discourse community where student writers are viewed as equal participants and constructors of the terms of the discourse, students whose opinions are as valid as that of the experts in shaping and determining the terms of the discourse. Teaching essay writing not as formalistic writing models but a dialogic means for critical and collaborative thinking and meaning-constructing decenters the authority of the discourse and empowers student writers. Liberated from the empty, abstract forms of writing that ignore personal voice, students can step into a context where the private and public territories are fused and an individual voice is found and established through conflicts and confirmation.

In composition studies, the relegation of essay has been historical and political. Expository writing as personal writing has been positioned in opposition to the scholarly research writing as unworthy of scholarly interest. In composition classrooms, experience-based writing has been considered by proponents of discourse convention pedagogy as isolated individual activities that do not respond to or substantiate the socially-constructed and discourse-defined nature of meaning making, and thus do not help students to critique the social institution that shape their values. On the other hand,

scholarly essay writing, with its traditional practice of using canonic essays as writing models to be imitated and imposed upon students' writings, has been criticized by theorists who are eager to make students the center of writing classrooms and provide them with opportunities to authorize their own meaning. Currently, postmodern pedagogy proposes a whole new agenda for literacy, which again tends to expel essayistic literacy from its framework as an incompatible opposition, arguing that essay writing does not correspond with the twenty-first century reality and will not prepare the students for their future career needs.

Such relegations or understandings of the essay are fundamentally inadequate and unjustified due their confused definition of the genre. Tracing back to the origin of the genre to Montaigne, we can recognize the essay as a fundamentally dynamic discourse that is highly adaptive and fully applicable in current composition studies and writing practices. The essay is an explorative genre, providing the writer a chance not only to examine the rhetorical, historical, social and cultural context that cultivates and shapes the writer's values, but also allow the personal to navigate through such traditions, preconceptions, and assumptions for a meaningful comprehension and resolution, albeit tentative and never fully disclosed. The essay assumes a skepticism toward the authority of received notions and rhetorical conventions, recognizing the uncertainty and temporality of knowledge and truth, which marks both Montaigne's sixteenth-century reality and our postmodern consciousness. The essay is dialogic from its birth, empowering a dialogic self as an agent who is equally important as the "authorities" in meaning-making and knowledge-constructing. The genre is resistant to any rigid forms of

development, allowing the writer to initiate the responsibility for finding the fitting form for the progressive process of the mind emplotting experiences, ideas, and readings. Instead of setting the essay against the new technology literacy as Faigley suggests, such generic features and underlying assumptions of the essay closely correspond to the postmodern reality of our time. The major shift of assumptions about knowledge, from authoritative and individual to egalitarian and communal; classroom power politics, from teacher-centered to dialogic and student-initiated; responsibility, from imposed on students by teacher to collaboratively constructed through dialogue and interaction; and the self, from solitary and isolated to a dialogic explorer attempting discovery through association—opposes the postmodernist view of the essay as an ossified, authority-dictated modern hierarchical structure. It is not difficult to observe the similarities between the new Renaissance and our own postmodern age, both marked with radical transformation of consciousness after severe questioning and interrogation of pre-conceived notions. The very fact of its emergence from the struggles through the revolutionary social context of the Renaissance serves as compelling testimony to the essay's compatibility with the postmodern condition, a compatibility that affirms the vitality of the essay as a genre not to be repudiated by postmodernist composition studies.

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