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Subjectivity and Academic Discourse: Apples, Cupcakes, and Beige

Cover Page Footnote

Frances Jo Grossman teaches composition at Georgia State University. A graduate of Emory University in the interdisciplinary fields of psychology and literature, she also writes poetry.

Subjectivity and Academic Discourse: Apples, Cupcakes, and Beige

Frances Jo Grossman

*Pain gives of its healing power
where we least expect it.*

Martin Heidegger

Paul Ricoeur writes, “What asks to be brought to language in symbols; but which never passes over completely into language, is always something powerful...” (1976, p. 63). This “something powerful” precipitated a search when I believed my writing held nothing ever to say again. Poet-philosopher Martin Heidegger describes poetry “as saying which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into a world” (1971, p. 74). Heidegger places language in the context of disclosing and opening: “Language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time” (p. 73). I had not been aware of “something” needing to be brought into the Open. I was simply lost, and the world was colored gray.

I kept remembering Camus’ first line from *The Stranger*: “Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can’t be sure” (1958, p. 563). And, I remember the coldness I felt not knowing exactly which day. That stranger ultimately gazed at “the dark spangled sky from a prison chamber with his heart open to the benign indifference to the universe” (p. 640). The stranger’s tale presented difficult questions for both me and a sophomore class. During my early college teaching, I fell in love with Existentialism and such phrases as Camus’ “condemned to freedom” (1966, p. 301), Sartre’s “existence precedes essence” (1966, p. 277), and Pascal’s “you must wager...which will you choose” (1966, p. 223). I still hold close those books, but my perspectives on responsibility, teaching, and choice have been tempered by sharp encounters with mortality.



My mother died on September 7th. I know the day, a holiday denoted to honor laborers, September’s first Monday. I remember the scene. That early morning I heard my name called by a stranger in a North Carolina mountain camp. Turning from the breakfast line, I set down the cold metal tray and followed the camp

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director. Something within me began a deep beating because the retreat had specified, "No telephones, except in emergency." The director pointed to a telephone in the kitchen. I listened, then sank into the chair brought by another stranger to whom I had waved, "Come, help." Help translate the words from my youngest daughter, calling long distance with her message, incomprehensible, yet the familiar language of sorrow—language of death.

There had been that other death—my brother, my blue-eyed twin. Seeing my tears on his last visit, he held my hand, "I didn't mean to hurt you." His wounding words, spoken moments earlier, had merely been the truth. My daughter's critical illness could no longer be hidden behind the mask I wore, pretending against such reality. Seeing my confusion, he gave a prescription to return from grief. "Be with people," he prompted, knowing my penchant for seeking refuge in the words of poets rather than in the presence of others.

And then he was gone. Outrageous humor, boots, tall brother. Gone. I cannot remember the day he died. Several seasons have turned, and although that Sunday morning scene is still vivid, I can never remember the date of that call. Alone in my bedroom, I was told of storms, icy curves, car destroyed, and a coroner's findings. Someone later offered, "Died instantly." Just a season to remember, a time preceding the South's early spring, about daffodil time. What now of my brother and my mother gone too? Both birthdays arrive in April, but neither is here to receive flowers or telephone calls. Time to mark this interim of floor sitting, reading poetry, Matthew Arnold's "The Scholar Gypsy" (1959), the title I have always transposed to "The Gypsy Scholar." Does it matter whether one is a gypsy scholar or a scholar gypsy? It quite likely matters. A colleague counsels, "Claim the voice you already know; you have no other time. What fear binds you rather than lets you assert your knowing?" My responses are feeble. I say, I don't have enough depth; I need another degree or a deeper understanding of Heidegger's *being* and Kierkegaard's *caritas* (as cited in Brown, 1955).



I had forgotten my exhortations to my students, "Write what you know." Truest writing emerges in stages not clearly defined yet somehow discernible. Writing develops through story; the extended narratives tell what happened. With familiar guidelines students choose sequences of temporal order or re-ordering the telling of the hour, the day, the event. Find the pictures, describe them, feel the scene. See the images in your mind's eye; re-create them with words as your resource.

And they write stories that beguile with their sincerity and bravery and alert me to dangers in their lives. The class applauds stories that capture what it is to be the only white kid, the only black kid, the one assigned a seat behind the bookcase where she could hear but barely see the teacher. We read of a high school senior's battle to extricate herself from gang membership in the Blades. She knew the inevitable confrontation must be set in a public place; the police would be called if anyone were cut or shot. And someone was shot, and the police did come. The summer ends. Students' papers mix graduation and college with funerals for friends, a suicide, and a drug-related street killing. Accessible,

extraordinarily vivid, the stories speak, "This is me—the self who writes."

Then, moving toward more formal discourse, the students blend personal narrative with critical reflection. Some students make this transition without strain, yet few retain their natural voice, wry humor, or assured sense of "I know wherefore I write."

Again, on the floor surrounded by the texts of Yeats, Eliot, and Arnold, all who have given the world a "scholar gypsy" (gypsy scholar?), I cannot write. Not just my story seems lost, but the autonomy and assurance that I earned in teaching term after term feel broken. I do not yet recognize this incertitude as a deep struggle to reclaim writing, my voice. Yet, my body knows that special sensitivity of entering the classroom to eager and not-so-eager students, where I live the role of teacher in the manner taught by Louis Agassiz (Shaler, 1957), or Joseph Conrad, or Maya Angelou, or Annie Dillard and all those who have guided our seeing.

But in this moment, my questions spiral darkly. What do I see? What do I have to say? Where is my story? My story is loss—loss and fear of being abandoned with no one to notice or care whether I ever write again.

Then I remember this gypsy—the scholar and the wonder of Arnold's story. I return to the old legend, the tale of the run-away scholar who learns of powers and ancient mysteries and never comes back, though he has promised to share his newly found secrets to fellow scholars. Yet, Arnold does not condemn the gypsy's failure to return; instead, he accepts the truant and makes a plea to "keep thy solitude" and "unconquerable hope." Arnold creates a poetic world where enchantment, timelessness, and immortality prevail.

Perpetually at play, the gifted scholar portrays one of many heroes in literature who pose questions about losing intuition or suppressing impulses. As literary critic, Arnold affirmed that the effect of literature on readers must be given serious consideration; he considered essential those "qualities which fortify readers" (Trilling, 1959, p. 589) to help them become more resolute in confronting a world of difficult change. In writings marked by concern for imagination, the validation of emotion, and fear of loss of the power to feel, Arnold, the poet, cared.

Now, the poet's caring restores me to what is already known—stories must be told; stories must be written. I guide myself as I guide reluctant students. "Begin with your own story. You can't get it wrong." It is then that I begin writing my stories:

Growing up in the western Pennsylvania's foothills, I watched the seasons turn in majestic autumns, long winters, with spring colors not seen until May. Mother, from Alabama, told us about early spring—February with daffodils blooming down "home." We never believed her. We thought, just another story of longing for the red dirt farm of her girlhood.

When no family in our neighborhood owned an automobile, buses were transportation to any "where." On Mother's Saturday trip downtown, she brought me a red apple from the open-air stand. I no

longer remember what she bought for my brothers and sisters:
Encircling her, we scanned packages placed on the kitchen table.
She brought me a single apple. I remember.

This fall, about a month after Labor Day, I began buying apples, bags and bags of apples.

In seventh grade I packed my lunch with Mother's lunch "stuff"—bologna, cold cellar apples, and chocolate cupcakes in store-bought packages of three. Mother cut open the packages of cakes, and we rewrapped them in packages of two in wax paper. We seventh graders, the silliest beings inhabiting our planet, pointed, and shrieked. I noticed other cupcakes in neat cellophane, vanilla squiggles across the top, filled with cream.

This fall, about a month after Labor Day, I began buying cellophane packages of chocolate cupcakes with vanilla squiggles and creamy filling. I sometimes bought three packages and ate them all at once.

Mother wore beige, beige blouses, sweaters, suits, shoes, and several coats. When I was seven, she chose brown velvet for my Christmas pageant dress. A long time ago I wore beige or tan until a day came when I realized that my entire wardrobe was some shade of brown. After that, I bought black, fuchsia, blues, burgundy, and gray and wear blue and black until this day.

This fall, about a month after Labor Day, I bought an old beige corduroy jacket (reversible, beige inside and out) at my favorite thrift store. I wore it every day.

By the end of January my sense of days and nights was confused. I'd awaken in a cold sweat wondering, "What time is it? What has happened?" And with a sharp blow, I would blur back to awareness—it is a new year. Then friends told me, "Eventually a sleep deficit takes its toll. You need to rest and release your mind from the burden of this wakeful watching." Maybe I was guarding the night universe so no more brothers or mothers would get lost. And then I wrote:

Apples, Cupcakes, and Beige

I began buying apples
green, golden,
granny apples,
beautiful heart shaped,
red delicious,
little blue circles claiming
prize quality

I bought more apples
adding to the bottom
refrigerator drawer already full
more green, more red, more gold
I did not eat any

I bought chocolate twinkies
seventh grade cupcakes
with cream filled centers
I bought three packages of two
and ate them all at once

I bought an ugly beige corduroy jacket
and wore it every day

and finally
I awoke in the middle of the night
screaming
I am not a dying frail old woman.

I have not yet burned the jacket
but the chocolate crusade is over
and I really like oranges and bananas

and today
I saw a red headed woodpecker
and a tiny little,
nondescript, as they say,
brown bird

and, I am not as afraid
of spring as I was.

And my friends cried with me, "We're glad you're back." I did not know I had gone away. Until I became conscious of my deep waking sleep of guarding the world, I had not noticed the calendar turning. It was daffodil time, the season of my brother's death. I did not know that my longing for his presence had been so strong that I would forget his formula for living and instead become the mother who joined her first son. Fragile little woman who had completed her life, gone now with no more April birthdays on earth.

• • •

Once our body's buried grief is recognizable in the light of language, it can be named. Phenomenologists differ on many issues but largely agree that human beings embody consciousness. Merleau-Ponty (1962) states, "My body knows

more of the world than I myself" (p. 276). In order to exist, the thoughts and visions that seek completion become embodied in words. "The naming of objects does not follow their recognition, but *is* this recognition itself" (1962, p. 207). Remy Kwant (1960) writes, "To name is to bring to light. As long as a thing is unnamed...it is submerged in a realm of obscurity. Through being named it emerges as a point of light in the world" (p. 38). Thus, grief moves from silence, to faint vision, to fragile wording, and then into a written—albeit fragmented—story. And story releases the "lost" writer back to the work of the world.

Writing, too, has been waiting, because I have abandoned several projects in the middle. Frank Kermode (1967), exquisite scholar-writer, tells us there are no beginnings. We always arrive in the "middest," to use his language (p. 39). We always come in the middle, but that is our beginning. Writers, professionals, and novices need reminders that we are always beginning and ending; each ending is a beginning, with each moment unlike any other.

Research demonstrating that the very act of composing is an epistemological tool (Bruner, 1987; Emig, 1977) confirms experience and returns us to primary questions. Does any single plane of language describe the encounter of subjective experience with objective existence? Metaphor promises illumination; empirical evidence provides data. Different domains of experience require different ways of seeing. The ambiguity of some experiences obliges us to understand them at multiple levels. And some individuals do not know that or they need reminders of simultaneous meanings. To select an interpretive strategy from such a multiplicity of choices holds potential confusion for any writer.

Yet, liberation for writers lies in the awareness that we need not follow an orientation that challenges our own integrity. We can remain on chosen ground. Herbert Fingarette (1963) articulates this concept:

The question is not how to introduce what is alien in spirit into any of these visions...[but], rather, to shift from one great vision to another so as to maximize our total vision, to deepen it, to build in many dimensions, to render what was opaque into that which is never transparent but increasingly translucent. (p. 235)

Writers live in a world so paradoxical that at the very moment of fixing words in print, they may become inwardly aware of changes which can only be addressed in retrospect. The more critical the writing, the more likely perception shifts, the more likely other perspectives will emerge, complementary or contradictory, though not essentially canceling the others. There is more to tell than I can ever say, and I know this even as I write. The challenge of "writing what you know" chooses a stance of informed naiveté, not burdened or burdening others by assertions of absolutes. Yet the challenge remains to stay open to sharper visions of experience. Kwant (1969) notes the paradox: "Strange as it may seem, our intellectual interpretations can sometimes make us blind to the original given" (p. 140). Bringing light to our questions rather than losing them in labyrinths of theory is essential to our goals.

Now, I again remember Camus (1955) and his last line from "The Myth of Sisyphus" that I have often repeated: "One must imagine Sisyphus with joy"

(p. 91). I do not know the exact day of my brother's leaving; I simply cannot remember. However, awake, I returned to teaching where my students are simultaneously serious and outrageously funny.

Despite Peter Elbow's (1991) freewriting and Gabriele Rico's (1991) clustering, at times students have trouble beginning. Possible responses: "Focus. Be present to your thinking. A writer's Now is the beginning and the ending." The writing surprises with the unexpected. The readings delight with recognition. Thoreau, Rodriguez, Welty, Walker, and all those beloved writers who cared to capture a reality so transitory that writing is the barest suggestion of what is. Most important, they cared not only to write for themselves but they cared enough to write for us, too.

I remember now other tasks, questions to research. How do personal stories connect to external contexts, to academic issues? I am not alone here. The very mentors who grounded my philosophical orientation offer more than an understanding of classroom dynamics; they defy any mandate that composition teaching is limited to traditional discourse, questioning not just the language of sophisticated formality but a writing stance of detachment, the impersonal, the lack of emotion (see Berthoff's concept "the consciousness of consciousness." 1981, p. 65). Expressive thinking and critical distinctions support the writer in merging objective and subjective knowing—although we have come to understand that such designations of knowing are not sufficient. James Moffett affirms the whole student, expressing concern that the absence of spiritual values seriously inhibits writing, that isolated writing in artificial contexts divorces writing from "all octaves of our being—physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual" (Brand & Graves, 1994, p. xi). The parade of scholars, theorists, and perhaps gypsies proceeds along with the ongoing debate of the permeable boundaries connected to teaching writing both personal and academic, both critical and creative (Gleason, 1993; Wyche-Smith & Rose, 1990). Within this multiplicity, some embrace a dialectic between the poles of the personal and the public, for although rhetorical traditions have separated narration from exposition, they can be considered an "interdynamic continuum" (Dipardo, 1990, p. 84). The theories of Paul Ricoeur (1980) and Jerome Bruner (1987) provide the scholarly basis for accepting narrative as a way of knowing.

Writing moves toward wholeness when students engage in the struggle to give passionate expression to their own issues. Racism, abuse, and family dilemmas evolve from personal stories to rhetorical situations appropriate in academic circles. Students generally do not think of themselves as writers, but if their work is read aloud and applauded, they can no longer deny that possibility. Other times when students hear each others' voices, the silence creates a space to name a tacit dimension that had existed prior to the writing but had not found expression. This is the mystery of intersubjectivity. By beginning with the real, the true, the issues emerge subterranean from the stories as each writer finds affirmation in, "As I see this, it is."

We can create an honest space for silence to move into words. We do this by being open to mystery, to silence, to the resonance of language—by not being afraid of unstructured assignments, not fearing the secret, unspoken questions of discovery. The students write: I am light skinned in a dark skinned family; my

parents are angry when I do not speak Chinese at home; my mother cries since my sister ran away. All true. All stories connected to solemn questions in a world of conflicts within and wars without.

And a body of scholars has emerged to challenge designating knowing to any single conscious cognitive realm, to explore ways of knowing previously under-studied or unstudied by composition theorists. Such ground is both brave and treacherous in the academy, bastion of quantifiable research, where emotion, intuition, inspiration, silence, and healing are likely to be met with disdain. If not lost in the academy, these topics are often perceived as threatening to more authentic research. Alice Brand (1989) researches from a cognitivist's perspective the territory of therapy, emotions, the psychology of writing. In his preface, Richard Graves (1990) names writing "spiritual agony and exhilaration," reflecting lived research in spirituality and silence, the interface between the rational and the mystical. Willing to face the impalpable, the inscrutable, these scholars bring together colleagues who research topics heretofore deemed inexplicable (Brand & Graves, 1994). Allowing the words "feelings" and "heart" is indeed "beyond the cognitive."

Knowing that all writing is ultimately time alone, with sometimes precarious boundaries, I still must write. So, too, students need to write of their losses or hidden searches until they are free again to pursue other issues. Whether we call such dim awareness affective barriers or writing blocks, when sleep, choices of food and clothing are governed by unconscious yearnings, all that we know of whole being and whole spirit tells us the body holds memories and understandings that must be spoken before the body-mind can move to other subjects. Students find validation for where they are in the story and confirmation that where they have been is a story well worth telling, well worth writing.

Ricoeur's (1976) philosophy of language encompasses an awareness of sensitive intersubjectivity. Because of our essential singularity in the world, we are beings of solitude, in the radical sense:

what is experienced by one person cannot be transferred whole as such and such experience to someone else. My experience cannot directly become your experience. Nevertheless, something is transferred from one sphere of life to another. This something is not the experience as experienced, but its meaning. Here is the miracle. The experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public. (pp. 15–16)

Ricoeur believes dialogical discourse appears as a way of overcoming the fundamental aloneness of each human being, and he names such communication "an enigma, even a wonder" (p. 15). Although writing brings complex issues different from those in speaking, the language events of writing and speaking are interrelated. Ricoeur expresses the paradox in universalizing the audience with a written text as opposed to face-to-face spoken dialogue, making written discourse "more spiritual" (p. 31) in the sense of moving beyond immediate personal encounter. The paradox suggests written dialogue includes the self-as-other in the writer's audience.

The gypsy told his fellow scholars that his knowledge needed a "heaven-sent moment" (Arnold, 1959, p. 610) in order to be imparted. He never told his secrets. We are earth-bound beings in body but we do know moments sent from heaven when our prisons of silence are broken into by the light of language. Some words, once written, lead to other travelers willing to journey with us, to the next story, to other beginnings. ☺

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