

# Academic Writing, I Love You. Really, I Do.

Eric Hayot

## Act I. Cut Your Hair

Everybody likes the other fellow's prose *plain*.<sup>1</sup>

I do not believe that professors enforce a standard of dull writing on graduate students to be cruel. They demand dreariness because they think that dreariness is in the students' best interests. Professors believe that a dull writing style is an academic survival skill because they think that is what editors want. . . . What we have here is a chain of misinformation and misunderstanding.<sup>2</sup>

Too many graduate students aim for seriousness rather than clarity. Often, dissertations sound like prose under general anesthetic.<sup>3</sup>

What might be the point of writing something which only a handful of people can understand? Of course it may be that we are like physicists at the cutting edge. But I really doubt it. We are writing ultimately about people's lives. What can it mean if only 20 people in the world understand what we are saying? It means that we are

1. Jacques Barzun, *Simple and Direct: A Rhetoric for Writers* (New York, 2001), p. 17; hereafter abbreviated S.

2. Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Dancing with Professors: The Trouble with Academic Prose," *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York, 2001), p. 340; hereafter abbreviated "DP."

3. William Germano, *From Dissertation to Book* (Chicago, 2013), p. 75; hereafter abbreviated F.

either so bad at writing that we can't communicate, or so full of ourselves that we don't want to communicate.<sup>4</sup>

Editors do not admire flabby writing. But linguistic flab abounds.<sup>5</sup>

In a book intended to reach a wide range of readers, endnotes and footnotes alike risk communicating at best a scholarly pretentiousness—"Let me show you how erudite I am"—and at worst a sort of fussy didacticism: "This text is far too difficult to understand on your own; please allow me to explain it to you."<sup>6</sup>

Don't use complex language or jargon when simple words will make your point equally well.<sup>7</sup>

I have seen academic colleagues become so enchanted by zombie nouns like *heteronormativity* and *interpellation* that they forget how ordinary people speak.<sup>8</sup>

Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college.<sup>9</sup>

Researchers in disciplines outside the humanities do not suffer as badly as their arts-based cohorts from the spilled sewage of excessive marginalia. [SA, p. 142]

4. Christopher Grey and Amanda Sinclair, "Writing Differently," *Organization* 13, no. 3 (2006): 448.

5. Jonathan Bennett and Samuel Gorovitz, "Improving Academic Writing," *Teaching Philosophy* 20 (June 1997): 9.

6. Helen Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), p. 139; hereafter abbreviated SA.

7. Joan Bolker, *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis* (New York, 1998), p. 122.

8. Sword, "Zombie Nouns," *New York Times*, 23 July 2012, [opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/zombie-nouns/](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/zombie-nouns/)

9. Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man without a Country*, ed. Daniel Simon (New York, 2007), p. 23.

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I want to lay it down as an axiom that the best tone is the tone called plain, unaffected, unadorned. It does not talk down or jazz up; . . . it does not try to dazzle or cajole the indifferent; it takes no posture of coziness or sophistication. [S, p. 111]

Your audience will not appreciate your showing how well you can use jargon.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, most deconstructivists are better thinkers than writers.<sup>11</sup>

Many authors, academic and otherwise, mistake irony for style. ["B," p. 76]

But let's not forget that the body has to be in shape, and for most of us, that means losing a little weight.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1990s, many authors defended nonsensical constructions like "The author of the camera is dead" by saying that anyone who had read Barthes and Foucault would understand. Perhaps so, but anyone unfamiliar with those seminal authors would return the book for a full refund. ["B," p. 76]

Some authors use repetition deliberately to make sure their readers will not miss the point. But readers do not miss the implicit condescension. It is as if the author were saying: "In case you missed this on the first round, here it is again. I didn't quite trust you to catch my meaning the first time."<sup>13</sup>

If we thought more like carpenters, academic writers could find a route out of the trap of ego and vanity. ["DP," p. 341]

Trying to add style is like adding a toupee. At first glance the formerly bald man looks young and even handsome. But at second glance—

10. Jennifer Crewe, "Caught in the Middle: The Humanities," in *Revising Your Dissertation: Advice from Leading Editors*, ed. Beth Luey (Berkeley, 2007), p. 133.

11. Scott Norton, "Bringing Your Own Voice to the Table," in *Revising Your Dissertation*, p. 86; hereafter abbreviated "B."

12. William P. Sisler, "You're the Author Now," in *Revising Your Dissertation*, p. 22.

13. Olive Holmes, "Thesis to Book: What to Get Rid of and What to Do with What Is Left," in *The Thesis and the Book: A Guide for First-Time Academic Authors*, ed. Eleanor Harman et al. (Toronto, 2003), p. 58.

and with a toupee there's always a second glance—he doesn't look quite right.<sup>14</sup>

The arrogance most likely to suffuse the dissertation is of the latter kind [the arrogance of those who don't know they're being arrogant]—brassy, and without that virtuosity which sometimes accompanies conscious exploitation (for in the hands of a genius arrogance may have an *élan* that compels admiration).<sup>15</sup>

The prose style is simple but stylish, and there is no disfiguring jargon (the 1980s spawned articles full of vapid expressions like 'ideological hermeneutics', 'dialectical negotiation', and 'the dialogics of desire'. Do not be tempted to emulate!).<sup>16</sup>

Writers of dissertations are expected to undertake a caricature of learned discourse whose sententiousness intimidates them (perhaps it revolts them as well) and whose artificiality of form and rhetoric arouses hostility in anyone who has read real books and responded to that naturalness of structure in prose which is characteristic of the world beyond the seminar room. ["D," p. 12]

While you're polishing your prose, imagine what Adorno or Lacan might have said if they had been graced with the gifts of direct and easy expression. [F, p. 119]

The dissertation system must have laid at its door an enormous squandering of creativity, youth, time, and money each year upon the execution of prose works that do not communicate significantly and are therefore dysfunctional. ["D," p. 11]

There's no point in making an elegant transition you won't be able to use.<sup>17</sup>

Footnotes are *not* there to host secondary or tertiary discussions, no matter how tempting this may seem. They are also not there to act as

14. William Zinsser, *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* (New York, 2006), p. 18.

15. Robert Plant Armstrong, "The Dissertation's Deadly Sins," in *The Thesis and the Book*, p. 18; hereafter abbreviated "D."

16. Richard Marggraf Turley, *Writing Essays: A Guide for Students in English and the Humanities* (London, 2000), p. 6.

17. Bolker, *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*, p. 121.

a dumping ground for anything not quite good enough to make it into your main text. You have to learn to let go!<sup>18</sup>

Bad dissertation writing inevitably reminds me of the sort of play in which young actors in gray wigs and heavy makeup play characters forty years older. [F, p. 118]

The assumption seems to be that writing and reading should involve suffering and that writing is not good enough unless it causes a little suffering. I have begun to characterize this psyche as sado-masochistic; propelled at some level by our pleasure in causing suffering (as writers) and pleasure in experiencing suffering (as readers).<sup>19</sup>

Don't hedge your prose with little timidities. Good writing is lean and confident.<sup>20</sup>

It is good to be alert to the smallest sign of deviation from plainness. [S, p. 119]

Whenever jargon shows its shiny face . . . the demon of academic hubris inevitably lurks in the shadows nearby. [SA, p. 121]

Many scholarly authors in the humanities feel that there is no avoiding academic jargon and endless dense sentences if they are to be taken seriously in their field. This is a shame because once you start writing that way it's extremely difficult to change.<sup>21</sup>

Stylish academic writers spend time and energy on their sentences so their readers won't have to! [SA, p. 62]

Academic writers are bad writers for three reasons. First, they want to sound smart. . . . Instead of using good words like *smart*, they choose *sophisticated* or *erudite*. . . . Second, academic writers never learned to write well. Their role models during graduate

18. Turley, *Writing Essays*, pp. 98–99.

19. Grey and Sinclair, "Writing Differently," p. 148.

20. Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, p. 70.

21. Crewe, "Caught in the Middle," p. 138.

school were probably bad writers. . . . Finally, most academics don't spend enough time writing to become good writers.<sup>22</sup>

What one sees in professors, repeatedly, is exactly the manner that anyone would adopt after a couple of sad evenings sidelined under the crepe-paper streamers in the gym, sitting on a folding chair while everyone else danced. ["DP," p. 336]

### *Revenge of the Nerds*

I too did not star at the dances in high school. I *was* once a member of the Snow Court, a sort of winter-themed, pseudo-homecoming appendage to a dance called, inevitably, the Snow Ball, though to be honest about that—my membership on the court, I mean—I know that a large group of my classmates had decided to sabotage the entire Snow aristocracy concept by voting in the most ridiculous membership possible. The number of saboteurs was not large enough, sadly, to ensure my subsequent election as Snow King, despite a guerilla campaign on my behalf organized by me and my friend Ted, a campaign whose highlight was, I recall, a poster featuring a photograph of the middle-school word-processing teacher adorned with a speech bubble reading, "Anyone but Eric Hayot for Snow King? That does not compute!" which we, but no one else, thought was hilarious.

Every attack is a counterattack, I'm told, and so it may be reasonable to imagine that the esotericker qualities of my prose—and yours, if you felt yourself addressed by the litany of complaints with which this drama began—stem from my attempt to avenge myself, at long remove, on those folks who were responsible for my all-too-computable, wintry losses. In such a scenario my work, and indeed the more general work of scholarly writing in the humanities of these last two or three decades, would amount to nothing more than a long-haul cultural revenge of the nerds, a revenge made all the more bitter and ironic by the fact that the bullies who are the technical subjects of its address are not listening. They were never really listening. And even if the footloose gyrations at the dances from which we were sometimes excluded have reappeared, transformed and managed, as appetites for a certain kind of gyration in prose, the work of those who comment so dourly on academic writing insists that such a transformation is nothing but compensatory: not the expression of an original, controlled set of preferences, not a hard-won, carefully chosen set of predilections

22. Paul J. Silvia, *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* (Washington, DC, 2010), pp. 59–60.

and pleasures, but the humiliating pulsing of a wound that has never scabbed over.

Even your tastes, they say, do not really belong to you. They're just the product of stuff—insecurity, embarrassment, desire—that the plain-speakers of the world don't need. But no one's tastes belong fully to them. Taste is an interface. It mediates the subjective and the objective, organizing feeling's relation to the world (organizing, in fact, the state of the interface, itself too subject, metastructurally, to a taste for certain arrangements of concepts like *world* or *feeling*). And *appetite* is just the name for a taste, a preference, someone suspects of being too much with the body: too irrational, too out-of-control. Again: all preferences are appetites. Plainness is an appetite. Rationality is an appetite (for the freedom, one supposes, from appetites). Some people *like* it. And those appetites, like all tastes, are the possible subjects of analysis.

To distinguish brutally, therefore, among appetites, tastes, and positions—to locate oneself on the rightward, objective side and one's opponents on the leftward, embodied end of that fatal continuum—is to have a bad theory of what liking is and does in the world. I could tell a story in which the angry critics of self-indulgent academic prose were working out their own humiliating defeats. Such a reading would aim, as its counterpart does, to castrate the point of view it attacks by imagining it as the product of castration. I make you powerless by showing that your motive is your powerlessness. Your stylistic taste in academic prose is nothing but a compensation for that lack of power. And nothing valuable or good can come out of powerlessness (one would say) because it (unlike power, apparently?) is too personal, too subjective. Everyone likes the other fellow's prose ornate.

I have no taste for castrating readings like these. There are other stories, other modes of reading, that would tell the story of American academic writing differently, that might, among other things, imagine that communication, argument, and feeling can happen well in modes other than the declamatory or the plain. The modes of excess so allowed would welcome the hermaphrodites and the playactors, the fatties and the ironists, and the nerds and the wearers of toupees.

### Act II. No Second Gorgias

"Okay. Imagine that I'm a Martian come to Earth to figure out how writing in the humanities works."

"You don't look like a Martian."

"Yeah, it's called the imagination for a reason."

“Have you ever noticed how little we talk, in the book reviews and readers’ reports, about the quality of someone’s prose?”

“It would be like talking about how someone smells. If you say you don’t like it then you’ve embarrassed them; if you say you do, you’ve embarrassed yourself. Writing is the odor of a body in a crowded elevator.”

“A surprisingly large amount of writing advice amounts to a demand that authors be more Anglo-Saxon and less Latin-French.”

“Does that have anything to do with gender?”

“You tell me.”

“I find myself in the awkward position of loving academic writing in the humanities and of wishing that it, the entire discourse about it, and the institutional structures that (don’t) support it, could be radically transformed.”

“Wait . . . did you put parentheses around ‘don’t’ in that last sentence?”

“Uh . . . yeah.”

“Huh. Well . . . I don’t think you wish that *everything* about academic writing could be radically transformed.”

“Have you ever thought about the way your assignments—well, probably the entire structure of grad school—train students to write a certain way, I mean, over certain kinds of time periods, within certain kinds of structures of practice?”

“No.”

“Why can’t writing be more like teaching? You’re always clear when you’re teaching.”

“I guess I’d have to think about why it makes sense to communicate differently in different contexts to answer that question.”

“So what kinds of things do professors write?”

“Mainly articles and books.”

“And graduate students?”

“Mainly short responses and seminar papers.”

“Are they the same thing?”

“Not really.”

“So the guy really said that bad authors mistake irony for style?”

“Yes.”

“I’m trying to be sincere for your little dialogues but sometimes those folks make it really hard, you know?”



"I'm working on a play."

"What about?"

"It's called, *What Adorno or Lacan Might Have Said Had They Been Graced with the Gift of Direct and Easy Expression.*"

"Huh. I guess 'Art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth' still has its uses."

"When you think about what it means that you walk around with Adorno quotes memorized for occasions like these, you'll realize that my play is going to be totally awesome."

"No one ever says all art is stupid."

"There's plenty of stupid art. But the great art justifies the category."

"So then is the fact that there are no 'great' works of scholarship—that we describe our best works as 'important,' 'ground-breaking,' 'significant,' but never, or at least very rarely, as 'great'—a sign of something wrong with scholarship, or something wrong with the way we describe it?"

"A survey of fifty recently published articles in literary studies counted, on average, thirty-four citations per article."

"I can't tell if you're trying to communicate a norm or a description."

"I think all the stuff on *lean* writing, cutting the fat, avoiding flab, and so on, bothers me because I was fat for a long time, and I was so ashamed of my body."

"Does that matter to the critique?"

"I don't know, but it matters to me."

"Do you think it's weird that academics who hate academic writing are the ones accusing other folks of being masochists?"

"What if literary criticism were one of the major nonfictional genres of the twentieth century? What if we were to write a history of that genre, not as a story of schools of thought succeeding one another (New Criticism to New Historicism), but as a history of experiments in structure, rhetoric, and style?"

"The only thing that's interesting about that is how completely obvious it would be if you said it about some other genre of writing."

"So I was at this talk, and this guy said, 'please, let's recognize that we need to stop writing and talking like so many eggheads and reach out to the public, because we're too caught up in our own little worlds.'"

"I guess students aren't the public?"

“No, by definition, apparently, the public is only the people who already think academics are narcissistic eggheads.”

“This paragraph of yours is great. Do you mind if I quote it in my book about academic style?”

“You’re writing about academic style?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it in a book about oxymorons?”

“Is it weird that your kneejerk reaction to me, after I’ve just praised your writing, is to insult the writing you’ve spent the last twenty years learning how to do so well?”

“So listen to this: ‘a book or article weighed down by awkwardly placed parenthetical citations and ponderous footnotes will probably be less readable, less engaging, and ultimately less persuasive than a piece of writing that wears its scholarly apparatus lightly’” (SA, p. 135).

“But what if the parenthetical citations aren’t awkwardly placed, and the footnotes aren’t ponderous?”

“I guess nobody knows.”

“So Emerson quotes Schlegel, ‘in good prose every word is underlined,’ or something like that, and then says, I suppose that means, ‘never italicize.’”

“What a dick.”

“Wait, what? Who hates Emerson?”

“Well, look. It’s just the same old prejudice against the nonverbal. ‘Real’ emphasis, whatever that means, is supposed to come *only* from the words and the grammar, not from some other capacity of print as a medium. It’s just warmed-over, macho phonocentrism.”

“I guess . . .”

“Look, anyone who really meant something like that would have to explain to me why they’re okay with commas, periods, or the spaces between written words. None of those appear in speech either.”

“Look, I’m not projargon. Who could be? It would be like being pronorrhea. But I’m not antijargon, either.”

“You’re anti-antijargon.”

“Yes.”

“What can we do to change the way we write so that people won’t make fun of us or feel contempt for us?”

"There's nothing wrong with exposing yourself to contempt or derision. As long as you're doing it to the right people."

"Institutional problems require institutional solutions."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that if you want to change the way you think about writing then you ought to try changing the institutional structures that have taught you—institutionally, but implicitly—what it is, what it does, and what it means."

"So a friend and I were looking at a hundred recently published books, trying to figure out how they work. And it turns out that though almost all of them—eighty-eight—have a separately labeled introduction, only fifty-seven had a labeled conclusion."

"And from this you conclude?"

"That I need to develop some good arguments about why people should have labeled conclusions."

"What if instead of going on about how footnotes and italics are bad, scholarly writing would take advantage of all the resources of print, including underlining, bolding, printing in columns, colors, and so on."

"Like *House of Leaves*?"

"Sure, why not? But if you could be even 5 percent more adventurous than we are now, which is a long way from Danielewski, you might actually get some interesting stuff. And if you tried, and you didn't, then that would be interesting, too."

"So Plato says that rhetoric's not an art, but a knack."

"A knack? Who calls things knacks? A knack for what?"

"For producing a certain gratification and pleasure. Style has the same relation to truth as, say, makeup to a gymnast."

"I think he has a bad theory of the relation between makeup and gymnastics."

"So every semester graduate students write two or three twenty-five-page papers in the last month or so of the term."

"Yeah."

"I guess they're practicing to write like professors do."

"No, actually, no professor I know writes that way."

"So what are they practicing?"

"Do people complain that they can't read articles published by physicists or economists, or somehow blame that incapacity on physics and economics as fields?"

“Not much . . .”

“Well, if you read something and can’t understand it, and I read it and can, which one of us is stupid?”

“Can I tell you about something that bothers me?”

“Do you ever do anything else?”

“Okay, good point.”

“So is your problem with these folks that they are, knowingly or unknowingly, enabling a discourse about academic life that is basically aligned with the worst elements of antiintellectualism? That they undermine federal and state support for the humanities?”

“Yeah, that’s part of it . . . as far as I can tell the easiest way for an academic humanist to get published in the *New York Times* or the *Atlantic* or even the *Chronicle of Higher Education* is if they’re willing to say that the liberal arts are empty, self-serving bullshit, that grad school is a scam, that professors are vengeful nerds, and so on.”

“You should call that the Stanley Fish rule.”

“Why do all these people hate footnotes?”

“I have no idea. I like footnotes. I mean, seriously, what a great invention! Think of all the things they let you do. They’re like some amazing technology that radically changes the entire nature of the written page—not just the balance between argument and evidence, but the entire look and function of what a piece of paper can do.”

“So you’re saying the problem is that they’re a technology.”

“I think my problem is that I have two different bones to pick, and they’re not the same thing.”

“Which two?”

“One has to do with the way that most academics talk or write about academic writing. And the other has to do with the way writing isn’t taught in graduate school, or talked about in the professoriate, which has to do with the institutional patterns governing writing as a practice.”

“I think you only have one bone to pick, and it’s called ‘contempt.’”

“The whole thing has to start by thinking about what writing is and what it’s supposed to do.”

“And . . . ?”

“Well, it’s not clear to me that the rules that govern one genre—the role clarity or, say, plainness play in its production—should govern them all.

It's like saying that a traffic sign should be made with the same aesthetic principles as a crime scene photograph or a Rembrandt painting."

"In your story is academic writing the crime scene photograph or the Rembrandt painting?"

"I was thinking about that thing you said earlier, about how talking about writing is like talking about how someone smells:"

"Yeah?"

"Is that because we believe that the quality of someone's writing, like their smell, is something they can't do anything to change?"

"Probably, though I need to point out that given the way you all teach and talk about writing, that's not a completely unreasonable thing to come to believe."

### *The Pathological Reader*

So what's wrong with the way academics talk about their writing? Or, rather, what does the way academics talk about their writing teach us about the theories of writing, of communication, and of truth that govern what I'll call, without prejudice, the ideologies of writing in the academic institution today?

Let's begin by recognizing that academic writing is not just a set of words on a page but is a *procedure*. One major endpoint of that procedure is the publication of a limited set of words on pages (or online). But that endpoint appears within a series of connected institutional structures that include large-scale nonprofit and corporate entities (the journals and publishing houses, the universities themselves) and formal and informal patterns of practice and habit, including the various instructional modes that shape the writing we do (the response paper, the seminar paper, both instructional, and the conference paper, the article, the book). Each of these modes presupposes both a set of generic conventions and a writing process by which one accomplishes them. At the lowest scale of practice, which we call *style*, we find the various professional conventions, including paratextual ones like titles, footnotes, or citational practice, microgenres like the block quotation or the anecdote, the various largely unconscious but nonetheless disciplinary and habitual patterns of sentence formation, word choice (using *stage* as a verb, for example), and epistemological and rhetorical structure, all of which can vary, of course, by subfield (so that we can distinguish the writing of a deconstructive feminist from that of a New Historicist on the basis of "style" alone).

All of this procedural activity, among which I include, then, the entire practice of writing, from doing research to drafting to revising or copy-

editing, as well the institutional, professional, and stylistic structures and patterns that teach, mandate, and reproduce the major scholarly genres, produces a significant metadiscourse. And all of this metadiscourse and procedure is mediated, not so much finally as simultaneously, by the vast numbers of people making up its audience, or audiences, most of whom are also participants in the production of scholarly writing, whether as publishing members of the faculty or as undergraduate authors of five-page midterm papers. Together these make up what we might call, after Christian Jacob, the structure of academic writing as a “site of knowledge.”<sup>23</sup>

If one were to love academic writing, I mean, to love all of it, then one would have to love not just the sentences but the entire structure—social, personal, disciplinary, institutional, and technological—that surrounds it: the site of knowledge that it makes, and is. That wouldn’t mean loving everything that happens in it all the time, every single practice or sentence. Love isn’t just repair; it’s also aggression, confusion, resentment.<sup>24</sup> If I love academic writing as a whole—if it sends me to heights of happiness and despair—it is for the simplest and most selfish of reasons, which is that it has so often filled me with happiness, with desire, with a sense of direction and companionship, and sometimes with a feeling of immense creative power. But I know, beyond the self, for I have seen it in two decades of teaching and learning from others, including others I only know through the written word, that a self-chosen apprenticeship in academic prose can be transformative, that others I know and don’t know, faculty and students, have been not only stymied and frustrated but also expanded, glorified, and changed by their passage through the demands and possibilities of the writerly disciplines that govern scholarship in the humanities today.

To the producers of the immense amount of loathing and contempt governing much of the metadiscourse on academic writing, ~~I affirm: you~~ have not accounted for a writer or a reader like me, or indeed for the many writers and readers like me, who have a taste for writing that does not say everything that it does, and for whom Theodor W. Adorno or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Jacques Lacan or Judith Butler have provided an immense amount of pleasure, not just at the level of the idea, but at the level of the sentence. When the metadiscourse isn’t ignoring such readers entirely—“everybody likes the other fellow’s prose *plain*” (except of course

23. See *Espaces et communautés*, vol. 1 of *Lieux de savoir*, ed. Christian Jacob (Paris, 2007); my trans.

24. If this kind of partial, dappled love seems like a strange version of love to you, well, do you love absolutely everything about the people you love, all the time? Or do you sometimes want to murder them to free yourself from that terrifying attachment?

the people who don't)—it is shaming them by accusing them of arrogance (“the demon of academic hubris inevitably lies in the shadows nearby”), insecurity (“they want to sound smart”), elitism (“if we thought more like carpenters, academic writers could find a route out of the trap of ego and vanity”), or perversion (“I have begun to characterize this psyche as sado-masochistic”).

Now, there is nothing wrong, let us agree, with being a masochist. Or a carpenter. But if you want to insist that scholarly writing is somehow fundamentally broken and off course you need to account for the large number of folks with their shoulders to the wheels, pushing happily as both writers and readers in what you think is the wrong direction. Excluding those people from consideration by insisting that their desires and pleasures are essentially pathological means that you will have, inevitably, an incomplete and therefore probably bad theory of what writing is and how it works.

But of course such a critique assumes that I am responding to people who aim to describe and understand what scholarly writing is. And I am in fact responding to people who are less engaged in understanding things than in convincing others, by accident or on purpose, to understand them in a particular manner. Intentionally or not, that manner contributes perfectly to the antiintellectual, antihumanistic discourse that drives much popular discussion of the American university. Which is why it's so easy for such writers to find an audience.

Let us imagine someone who plays a game you like the “wrong” way. Let us further imagine that their gameplay adds activity to the game that does not seem, to you, to be substantially connected to the purpose of the game; it seems ornamental, frivolous. At a certain moment we might stop arguing about who was playing the game the right way and decide to call the two ways of playing different games, recognizing that each of them has its own integrity and produces its own pleasure precisely by virtue of its play (or refusal to play) with concepts like ornament and seriousness.<sup>25</sup> The theory of writing behind the critique of footnotes and jargon—that is, the basic idea of what writing should look like and how it should work, if the mythical carpenters are to understand it—would tell you that ornament gets in the way of communication. I am saying that what some folks call ornamentality communicates and gives pleasure, that for some readers

25. This is essentially to repeat what I take to be Jacques Derrida's argument against John Searle in Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston, Ill., 1988).

it *is* rather than *gets in* the way. This is a minimal, democratizing response to a certain kind of writing discourse.

But one could go further and say that if the game is language—and it is—then the antiornament crowd does not understand the game very well at all. The theories of language and literariness that govern almost every instance of critical reading in the profession do not stop applying to sentences once we move beyond the realm of poetry or fiction. Minimally it's weird for a profession to have one theory of language for its object and another for its products. Why shouldn't the open productivity of the literary—its astonishing dynamic and reproductive capacities in the realms of imagination, feeling, thought, and aesthetics—be thought of as a feature of scholarship itself? People who like Ralph Ellison or Charles Baudelaire, William Shakespeare or Sei Shônagon, ought to think twice before announcing that everyone should write clearly most of the time.

But it is not enough, if you have ever loved academic writing, to modify your theories of how it works by accounting for the presence of “pathological” readers. The modes of care appropriate to love require us to defend our pleasure more regularly and more forcefully in the metadiscourse, lest the only voices our audiences hear be the ones calling for the dissolution of writerly style. To do so would be easy enough, a question of making time for it. What's harder is that we need to understand that the ways scholars have *institutionalized* writing practice, especially at the graduate level, express a contempt that is no less deep and no less ideological than the contempt expressed so openly by the metadiscourse on academic writing.

In early 2013 I spoke to some graduate students at Yale University, who had read some of the manuscript for a book I'm doing on academic writing. One of the things I talk about in the first part of the book is how afraid I am of writing—how much it scares me, how I struggle with anxiety and self-doubt, and how I've developed a whole repertoire of practices, both mental and physical, to integrate that fear into my process as a writer. One of the students said to me, “you talk about how you're scared of scholarly writing, but you're not scared of writing other kinds of things, like blogs or grocery lists. I've done some other writing, too, and it's not scary. So what does it mean for me to stay in this profession, to stay committed to writing in a genre that makes me feel so bad about myself? Does it mean that I'm committed to a life of fear and emotional pain?”

And I said, the problem is that so many people imagine that to stay in the profession means trying to stop feeling bad about writing. I too have dreamed of the day when it won't hurt any more, when it will become easy, just like it is (I imagined) for the academically famous or,



more nervewrackingly, for the colleague who just seems to get writing done all the time and never complains in public about feeling stuck or scared.

All this strikes me as a terrible fantasy, one in which the path to health is to dominate something inside you in the name of productivity, to drive it down into nothingness or to carve it out in the name of some new, healthful wholeness that would succeed it. That's never happened to me, I told this student. I write from my fear and pain, not despite or beyond it. And this gives me pleasure; it pleases me to expose my pain to the practice of writing, every time I write (even when I'm not writing about pain). There may be others out there for whom that odd mixture of pleasure and pain simply isn't there—maybe they write happily all the time! But at least one person does. And I think it feels strange, but good, to know that you're not broken as a writer if you feel this way, that the mix of fear, desire, and pleasure that makes up the life of a scholarly writer is not in fact wrong or damaged—it's not even a relation to a sustaining object, sometimes—but, at least, again, in one case, perfectly all right. Not easy, but all right. And if you can imagine feeling all right, if you can see your fear and the desire that drives it, and the enjoyment that links them, as aspects of a chosen life, as belonging in redeeming and unredeemable ways to your practice as a writer, then I think you can and still should think about continuing on with your degree; you have an appetite for it. Because the struggle to capture something "in written words is itself often," as Michael Ann Holly once said of the task of art history, an endlessly incompletable "gesture toward reparation and wholeness."<sup>26</sup>

That's what I told the student at Yale. But where did I go to learn that the fantasy of total self-mastery, the tamping down or murdering of fear, might not be such a good idea? Who did I read who taught me to understand my affective lifeworld as more than a combat between healthy, uncomplicated, efficient emotions and destructive, damaging, hurtful ones? Who has shown, over and over, that the political desire for, and expression of, force and eloquence, for and of the demands of deep interpretation, has stemmed historically just as often from a state of historical subordination—even something as minor and historically unrespectable as a series of teenage humiliations—as from a state of satisfaction, comfort, or power? Who allowed me to develop a sense of a complex and, yes, ornamented self, an incomplete whole that did not need to be so much fixed as accepted and engaged, to see it as a source of strength that—if you'll par-

26. Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton, N.J., 2013), p. 23.

don, for the moment, a bit of jargon—does not have to *have* the phallus, or *be* it, in order to participate in the social community of writers and thinkers that is the source of my deepest identificatory desire? Other scholarly writers—in feminism, psychoanalysis, queer studies, and affect studies—warned us all to beware of the temptation to battle strength with strength and showed us how to face and theorize the powers and the modes of “weakness”: Eve Sedgwick, Wayne Koestenbaum, Sianne Ngai, Heather Love, Nancy K. Miller—the list goes on.

Ask yourself: is there anything in the program that you’re in—either as a teacher or as a student—that teaches its writers something like that lesson or even presents it as an alternative? Is there anything in the program you’re in that actively prepares students for the emotional and embodied aspects of dissertation writing—prepares them, that is, for a kind of writing practice that bears only a passing resemblance to the one necessary to write good seminar papers or to do well on a comprehensive exam? What *are* the messages your existing institutional structures send about the emotional and practical aspects of writing or, indeed, about the entire relation of writing to the profession as a whole? What, for instance, is suggested about writing by the institutional practice of requiring seminar papers or, worse, by the fact that many such papers are returned with almost no commentary beyond the final grade?

People who care about writing can do better than we have done. We need to intervene more actively in the procedural and institutional patterns that frame, produce, and circulate scholarly writing, to take up and think harder about the ways in which we have institutionalized, despite ourselves, a contempt for writing well that makes for a bizarre accompaniment to the deep investments so many of us have in feeling writing otherwise.

### Act III. Those Happy Ages

*Some lovely sentences from Paul Saint-Amour:*

Even the alphabet as a solution to the problem of hierarchy is made implicitly arbitrary here. Taking d’Alembert’s cue, you might well choose to abandon the twenty-six letters and parcel knowledge out, instead, into eighteen Homeric episodes, each with its own style, organ, color, and art. Or you might, if you were Musil, store the Viennese honey of the known in a vast hive of essayistic cells linked only perfunctorily by narrative. In either case, you would be presenting a picture of what a society knew, but one rooted in the view from somewhere, patterned less on the monolithic reputation of the ency-

clopedia and more on its actual connectivity, its miscellaneity, its eccentricity.<sup>27</sup>

*Similes using "like" in Fredric Jameson's Postmodernism, and then my favorite simile of his, from The Political Unconscious.*

The prestige of these great streamlined shapes can be measured by their metaphorical presence in Le Corbusier's buildings, vast Utopian structures which ride like so many gigantic steamship liners upon the urban scenery of an older fallen earth.<sup>28</sup>

It strikes one then, in that spirit, that neofigurative painting today is very much that extraordinary space through which all the images and icons of the culture spill and float, haphazard, like a logjam of the visual, bearing off with them everything. [*P*, p. 175; love the echo of the last line of *Gatsby*!]

Like the three wishes in the fairy tale, or the devil's promises, this prognosis has been fully realized, with only the slightest of modifications that make it unrecognizable. [*P*, p. 320]

Media populism, however, suggests a deeper social determinant, at one and the same time more abstract and more concrete, and a feature whose essential materialism can be measured by its scandalousness for the mind, which avoids it or hides it away like plumbing. [*P*, p. 356; this one especially good because it's such a surprise, and doesn't explain itself.]

We are led to anticipate the imminent collapse of all our inward conceptual defense mechanisms, and in particular the rationalizations of privilege and the well-nigh natural formations (like extraordinary crystalline structures or coral formations excreted over millennia) of narcissism and self-love. [*P*, p. 358]

We have all those things, indeed, but we jog afterward to refresh the constitution, while by the same token computers relieve us of the terrible obligation to distend the memory like a swollen bladder retaining all these encyclopedia references. [*P*, p. 383]

Only Marxism can give us an account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past, which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily

27. Paul K. Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (forthcoming).

28. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C., 2003), p. 36; hereafter abbreviated *P*.

returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak, and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it.<sup>29</sup>

*How to use sentence fragments as summarizing transitions, per Franco Moretti in Graphs, Maps, and Trees:*

The rise of the novel, then; or, better, *one* rise in a history that [he goes on].<sup>30</sup>

A—multiple—rise of the novel. [G, p. 9]

An antipathy between politics and the novel. [G, p. 12]

The whole pattern; or, as some historians would say, the whole cycle: [he quotes]. [G, p. 13]

From individual cases to series; from series to cycles, and then to genres as their morphological embodiment. [G, p. 17]

Forty-four genres over 160 years; but instead of finding . . . [he goes on]. [G, p. 18]

A rounded pattern in Helpston before the enclosure; and a rounded pattern in *Our Village*. But with a difference: [he explains]. [G, p. 39]

*Bill Brown's use of the second-person singular pronoun in A Sense of Things, from least to most aggressive:*

You might say that all the objects on the library mantel, like the general clutter of the so-called Victorian era in America, were amassed in a hopeless effort to give substance to the abstract subject.<sup>31</sup>

Should you begin to think about things in late nineteenth-century America, it won't be long before you stumble over Mark Twain's House in Hartford, Connecticut. [ST, p. 21]

Moreover, whether or not you agree with Fernand Léger's belief that fragmenting an object frees it of atmosphere even as enlarging the fragments gives them a life of their own, you can hardly deny that the

29. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), p. 19. I love this sentence in general, but in the simile it's the "the" in front of "blood" that amazes me.

30. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (New York, 2005), p. 5; hereafter abbreviated G.

31. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago, 2003), p. 48; hereafter abbreviated ST.

objects in Strand's photograph, which seem suspended in a fragile balance, have curiously become organic or animate, have at least emerged out of their ontological status of being mere inanimate objects. [ST, p. 9]

Today, why do you find yourself talking to things—your car, your computer, your refrigerator? Do you grant agency to inanimate objects because you want to unburden yourself of responsibility? . . . Or is it simply because you're lonely? Because, unlike a child, you don't have a toy to talk with? [ST, p. 12]

*Probably my favorite sentence from James Agee and Walker Evans's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, a description of a house at night:*

In their prodigious realm, their field, bashfully at first, less timorous, later, rashly, all calmly boldly now, like the tingling and standing up of plants, leaves, planted crops out of the earth into the yearly approach of the sun, the noises and natures of the dark had with the ceremonial gestures of music and of erosion lifted forth the thousand several forms of their entrancement, and had so resonantly taken over the world that this domestic, this human silence obtained, prevailed, only locally, shallowly, and with the childlike and frugal dignity of a coal-oil lamp stood out on a wide night meadow and of a star sustained, unraveling in one rivery sigh its irremediable vitality, on the alien size of space.<sup>32</sup>

*Something about the archness of this Jane Gallop sentence, the balance between threat and promise, makes me really love it:*

I will return later to the analogy between the teacher's breasts and a painting in a museum.<sup>33</sup>

*How to throw your voice, with a side lesson on alliteration: Mark McGurl in "The Posthuman Comedy":*

Not only does genre fiction seem to violate the law of writing what you know from personal experience; not only does it bear its "formulaic" flatness on its grubby sleeve, catering to tastes uninformed by the university, but its darkly dorky aesthetic unseriousness is an affront to the humanities—hell, an affront to humanity. Look at these characters, little more than the toys of allegory! If only genre fiction exhib-

32. James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston, 2001), p. 18.

33. Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham, N.C., 2002), p. 30.

ited the chastity of quantitative representation one finds in a scientific paper; but, no, it insists on the comic personification of the absolutely other.<sup>34</sup>

*Georg Lukács's beautiful introduction to Theory of the Novel, translated by Anna Bostock:*

Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths. . . . Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars; the world and the self, the light and the fire, are sharply distinct, yet they never become strangers to one another, for the fire is the soul of all light and all fire clothes itself in light. Thus each action of the soul becomes meaningful and rounded in this duality: complete in meaning—in *sense*—and complete for the senses; rounded because the soul rests within itself even while it acts; rounded because its action separates itself from it and, having become itself, finds a centre of its own and draws a closed circumference around itself. 'Philosophy is really homesickness,' says Novalis: 'it is the urge to be at home everywhere.'<sup>35</sup>

*Elisa Tamarin, playing with rhythm and breath, in Anglophilia:*

If "ritual is not technological," and thus finally calibrated on no mechanical exchange of means and ends, its force and pleasure is proved again by noting just how little consequence attends to what American observers of the queen actually observe. The accumulation of small details about her personality allows chroniclers like Willis to witness and reproduce the way that Victoria, as her reign extends across a liberalizing nineteenth century, provides a purely social medium for political belonging that increasingly makes community and consensus out of nothing much at all.<sup>36</sup>

*Susan Stewart's aphoristic style in On Longing:*

In allegory the vision of the reader is larger than the vision of the text.<sup>37</sup>

34. Mark McGurl, "The Posthuman Comedy," *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Spring 2012): 550.

35. Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 29.

36. Elisa Tamarin, *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America* (Chicago, 2007), p. 33.

37. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C., 1993), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *OL*.

The movement from realism to modernism and postmodernism is a movement from the sign as material to the signifying process itself. [OL, p. 5]

The printed text is cinematic before the invention of cinema. [OL, p. 9]

The closure of the book is an illusion largely created by its materiality, its cover. [OL, p. 38].

In its tableaulike form, the miniature is a world of arrested time; its stillness emphasizes the activity that is outside its borders. [OL, p. 67]

We want the antique miniature and the gigantic new. [OL, p. 86]

Aesthetic size cannot be divorced from social function and social values. [OL, p. 95]

The grotesque body, as a form of the gigantic, is a body of parts. [OL, p. 105]

Temporally, the souvenir moves history into private time. [OL, p. 138]

*How to use a radical change in lexical registers to good effect; swearing optional:*

If the classic commodity form is said to disguise social relations among persons as objective relations among things, the japoniste commodity would present as some sort of human encounter what are in fact market relations. These aren't mutually exclusive, of course—just a question of how many dialectical whacks one gives the piñata of the commodity form.<sup>38</sup>

Even Adorno, the great belittler of popular pleasures, can be aghast at the ease with which intellectuals shit on people who hold to dream.<sup>39</sup>

*A sentence of Leibniz's that Roland Barthes reports liking in The Pleasure of the Text, and then the last sentences of Barthes's S/Z, both translated by Richard Miller.*

I personally take pleasure in this sentence of Leibniz: "... as though pocket watches told time by means of a certain *horodeictic* faculty, without requiring springs, or as though mills ground grain by

38. Christopher Bush, "The Ethnicity of Things in America's Lacquered Age," *Representations*, no. 99 (Summer 2007): 84.

39. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011), p. 123.

means of a *fractive* quality, without requiring anything on the order of millstones.”<sup>40</sup>

Just as the pensiveness of a face signals that this head is heavy with unspoken language, so the (classic) text inscribes within its system of signs the signature of its plenitude: like the face, the text becomes *expressive* (let us say that it signifies its expressivity), endowed with an interiority whose supposed depth compensates for the parsimony of its plural. At its discreet urging, we want to ask the classic text: *What are you thinking about?* but the text, wilier than all those who try to escape by answering: *about nothing*, does not reply, giving meaning its last closure: suspension.<sup>41</sup>

#### *Like Some Bridges*

Appetite juggles pleasure and control. So does the desire for form. What we describe as ornamental to the necessary is always a theory of appropriate hunger, an articulation of a principle governing both the object of its address (it defines the ontology of a game, its “proper” being) and a larger theory of the excessive, which explains why some people call bad writing fat or flabby. The transfer of disgust from the field of the body to the field of prose reflects the proximity of aesthetic judgment to gut feelings and gives us a vision of the complex capacities of a concept like excess, which includes the unnecessary in all its emotional guises, from frippery to gluttony.

In the history of architecture, the material used to support the arches of a bridge under construction, the wooden scaffolding that keeps the structure from collapse until it can support itself, is known as falsework. As the bridge proceeds across its gorge, falsework moves with it, supporting the arches one by one until the bridge can sustain itself entirely. Falsework is the negative of the finished arch, as necessary to the bridge’s construction as it is unneeded for its final form. Hence the name. Like Wittgenstein’s ladder, which must be thrown down after one has climbed up on it, the construction of the bridge observes and comments on the intimate relation between the necessary and the excessive.<sup>42</sup>

Scholarly writing is not entirely like building bridges. For us the balance between true and false work has no clear adjudication. Knowing which words or sentences are necessary, which ornamental, cannot be done for

40. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1989), p. 42.

41. Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Miller (New York, 1974), p. 217.

42. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London, 1922), §6.54; p. 90.



eternity or in advance. Another interpreter might always shift the balance, revealing the necessity of the ornaments, the ornamental in the seemingly essential. Pretending otherwise misunderstands what we do. Nonetheless one might see in the steady creep of the bridge across space a general model for the humanities, which ought always to be something that extends something, connects something, rather than blocks something. And because we do not always know to whom, or to what, we are reaching, because we do not always know the shape of the bridges we make, for us it is all falsework, all truework, which is why it is harder for us, sometimes, than for makers of bridges, why sometimes people can write a whole essay without being able to say, or say entirely, everything they mean, or all they feel, why sometimes also the reader, from the far side, may stretch some false-or-true work toward the coming bridge. If the reader likes to write, and has a taste for imperfect connections.