RECONSIDERING THE PERSONAL ESSAY: AN ALTERNATIVE ASSIGNMENT, THE MATERIAL ARTIFACT ANALYSIS

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Early in my graduate school career I found myself in the work room where my wearied eye fell upon an article push-pinned into the wall near the photocopier. "English 99: Literacy Among the Ruins" describes a magazine writer's brief foray into the life of contingent English faculty. I am quite certain that Frank Gannon's story was purposefully displayed in the copier room, not in hopes that it would be taken for instructional purposes (that is, in order to improve the teaching of writing), but to illustrate how besieged we English teachers are by the "vacuous, bored, and (read in quantity) soul-killing" essays that we are often forced to read and grade (Harvey 105).

I used "English 99" as a reading-response assignment for a Basic Writing class. Early in the first semester students had written several low-stakes "process-oriented essays" which were all much as the essays described in "English 99" —expressions of "feelings" linked loosely to cultural clichés and set in the vaguest of vague contexts ("today's society of today"). In large part, these student-writings even mirrored the "topics" that Gannon identifies– "life is hard"; "I can't do anything"; "I am tired"; "I have fun"; "I need freedom"; "what I can do good"; and "life" —so I intended this close reading of "English 99" as a pre-emptive strike against the "bad" student essays as described in the *Harper's* article (46).

But as we were working through "English 99," I realized that the student-writers did not apprehend the magazine article as prophylactic pedagogy. "English 99" offended them because Gannon was "being mean" to his students. And they did not relate to the students described in the essay (slacker sorority girls, jocks whose glory days had passed, immigrants) even as they did (quite obviously in their written work) resemble them. Nor did the student-writers see their essays as anything other than unique and original.

I redirected the lesson from the "error" of the student-writers (creating a generic, easily dismissed writerly ethos) to the "error" of the teacher (not reading "through" the student essays, beyond error to intention as Shaughnessy, Trimbur, Bartholomae, Perl, et al., encourage). Later, I realized that the error most often responsible for producing predictable and boring personal essays—and the concomitant antagonism between student-writers and writing teachers—is the assignment itself, many if not most of which have not changed for decades.[1,2]

Clichés in Student Essays

In "'Let Yourself Shine': Looking At and Through Students' Invention of Ethos," Julie Nelson Christoph explains that the things her writing students considered to be their boldest assertions of "sense of self" were precisely the ones that she, as the instructor and master reader-grader, found the "least interesting and distinctive" (179). Clichés shaped the student ethoi in Christoph's class, in print at least, into "emblems rather than individuals" (to borrow a phrase from Skorczewski).

But as Coles and Wall maintain, student-writers may have a high level of social or even ontological investment in clichés such as "The American Dream or the myth of individual opportunity" (from Skorczewski), and I don't consider it part of my teaching-of-writing to dismiss student opinions that differ from mine as reductive or simplistic. Rather, one ambition of the writing class is to learn, through specific lessons and writing assignments as well as general discussion, how clichés become cultural currency,

achieve value, and become situated in complex social milieu. Through ongoing attempts to situate cultural clichés within larger value systems (paradigms), the following writing lesson emerged.

General and Specific Solutions to Cliché Papers

David Bartholomae contended that these "commonplaces" (clichés) brought into the college classroom by student-writers stand in for "academic" conclusions because the student-writers understand the clichés of their own (real) world(s) and they do not understand the language of the Academy.[3] The assumption is that college students learn to "write academically" by a sort of social osmosis or modeling, that is, by reading and responding to academic scholarship often, as Bartholomae indicated, over a wide range of "voices and interpretive schemes," through the "voice" and (multiple) "codes" of another (specifically, the academician with "wisdom and power") and " . . . *before they have a project to participate in and before, at least in terms of our disciplines, they have anything to say*" (17, italics mine).

There are at least two "solutions" to Bartholomae's longstanding challenges–to create legitimate projects for student-writers and to give them a manageable academic language in which to pursue their projects. One solution is general, the other specific. The general cure for the condition of clichéitis is more attitudinal or political than practical as it encourages teachers to (re)consider these clichés as "error" only if the student-writers do not recognize them as socially-constructed and only if they cannot trace these "commonplaces" to some of the cultural conditions-traditions that have produced them. There is, however, a simpler method for decreasing clichés in student-writing while increasing student agency in the Academy: since bad prompts and assignments produce bad papers, change the assignments.[4]

Better Assignments Make Better Papers

Two of Bartholomae's claims in "Inventing the University" are that: 1) until student-writers have located themselves "within the

discourse of a particular community" all they can do is imitate or parody rather than invent and discover (11); and 2) students fake-it-until-they-make-it, "before they [even] have a project to participate in" and "have anything to say" (17). However, when student-writers are taught, explicitly and directly, a manageable academic discourse, they need not merely imitate and parody because this language proficiency, coupled with a doable assignment, leads to a claim to a legitimate academic project.

To teach this manageable academic discourse, lectures and recursive instruction should be focused on key theoretical terms: in my class, these are "paradigms," "social construction," and "rhetoric." The chosen terms needn't be these, but should be common in academic discourse and so might vary. Since these terms are the infrastructure of the entire course, they should be integral from the beginning, repeated frequently, and explained and expanded upon from a variety of angles. Readings on the terms help establish an intellectual ground on which the specific heuristics can be explored.[5] On another level, in small groups and individually, students should evaluate their own lives relative to these key terms, as opposed to reverting to simplistic descriptions of their experiences that lead to clichéd writing. When student-writers are instructed to evaluate the beliefs and assumptions of their lives and taught how to situate these within their own paradigms, they are able to see how their so-called personal values are, at least in part, socially constructed; this heightened self-consciousness increases student agency.

The following assignment introduces both accessible academic language and a unique heuristic that offers opportunities for creating "personal" essays that train student-writers in using the discourse of the Academy while utilizing their own experiences.[6] The assignment then results in a "legitimate academic project."

Material Artifact Analysis

"Material culture is just what it says it is, namely the manifestation of culture through material productions" (Prown 11). A Material Artifact Analysis (MAA) is then a practical

application of the theories and principles of cultural anthropology or cultural history or material cultural studies (see Miller, Schlereth) to the close examination of an artifact in order to reveal personal and cultural values (beliefs, assumptions, etc.) and the interrelations of these.[7] While the discussion of "materiality" is broad and can be quite esoteric, in practical terms for the writing classroom, MAA means locating an object of interest, describing it and then analyzing the artifact as a "text" within some sort of context(s): since these artifacts reflect the values or beliefs of the individuals who "commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them," then by extension these "things" reflect the beliefs of the larger societies (paradigms) in which they are embedded (and are preserved) and from which they emerge so MAA is a natural "text-in-context(s)" assignment (Prown 11).[8] In short, MAA essays prompt student-writers to determine "why some things matter" (Miller).

How-to Guide

The steps to MAA are these: 1) choose an artifact; 2) do a "thick description" of that artifact; 3) find metaphors or other "meanings" in this description; 4) develop a thesis; 5) interpret-analyze.[9]

The first, practical step then in MAA is to *choose an artifact*. This selection process can be as simple or as complex as the teacher wishes it to be. The choice of artifact, if made by the student-writers, can also determine the level of "personal" or "academic" in the essay. Arbitrary selections (a generic can opener, for instance) can force students into thinking about values in very creative ways (and might require more outside research, such as "the history of the can opener"), while the choice of a favored family memento, while more likely to produce the "personal" also has to be well-managed to prevent sentimentalization and the production of simply another "dead grandmother" story.[10] Students might be required to justify their decisions based on what Prown calls "cultural potency." That is, they should be able to say something about why their artifact of

choice has significant meaning, either to a group or community/ culture/paradigm or to themselves (Prown in Haltman 2).

But artifacts with especially or acutely high levels of "linkage" "between the object and some fundamental human experience" (such as precious family heirlooms with pre-established stories or myths) are often not the best choices, since these have already achieved the status of concrete maxims on the family level in the same way that larger icons have achieved set meanings on the "culture" level. Virtually any artifact can work. However, the best papers manage to interrogate, on a deep level, the cultural values that that artifact insists upon while being ready, willing, and able to debunk the mythologies (at both family and culture levels) that have usually created that "meaning" of that artifact. This content is achieved by following the several steps of the heuristic device of the MAA, which includes, after the artifact choice, thick description.

Since definitions of "thick description" can be quite complex (see Geertz) and become unwieldy for the composition classroom, the following definition is useful:

> . . . to thoroughly describe this object, [pay] careful attention as relevant to all of its aspects–material, spatial, and temporal. Be attentive to details (for which a critical vocabulary becomes useful), but ever keep an eye on the big picture. Imbue your description with the thick texture of taxonomy yet with the flow of narrative. Render it easy and appealing to read, as effortlessly interdependent in its parts as the object itself. Producing a sketch or schematic drawing may further this process, but avoid wasting precious words at this point on introductions, conclusions, restatements of the assignment, or autobiographical confessions: just describe what you see. Be sure to enjoy the pleasures in close looking–in translating material object into narrative description. (Haltman 3-4)

In short, the more description the student-writer can accomplish, the more opportunities she has to 3) find metaphors (meanings) from which to 4) develop a thesis that 5) guides real analysis.[11]

The following student essay well illustrates this move from the valorization of a family heirloom to the debunking of a family myth while placing this MAA in larger cultural contexts; since it incorporates all the necessary steps of a good MAA I will now turn to this student essay to illustrate how the MAA can work in a college classroom from choice of an artifact to analysis and thesis.

Context. "John's" essay is a high-stakes (40% of the semester's grade) major paper requiring a minimum of eight pages with eight reputable outside sources produced in a second semester, first-year composition class in an urban, Hispanic-serving college of 14,000 with an average incoming SAT score of 938. John's class is a "standard" cohort with conventional placement procedures and requiring only a "pass" grade (of D) from first-semester first-year composition to enter. John was one of six 'A' students in this class of 26. The overall class GPA was 2.45 (on a 4.0 scale).

Choosing an Artifact. John chose a saber-bayonet given to him by his paternal grandfather. John was thirteen at the time the gift was presented and "extremely excited with being handed what I thought was a piece of our family's history . . . " (5). He framed the antique weapon in a "faux gold display box" and hung it on his bedroom wall where it did not move for more than five years. What moved it, eventually, was the MAA essay.

Thick Description. The blade is for attachment to a firearm in order to convert the rifle into a spear for close fighting or, "more commonly to mark grounds." John describes in some detail and explains that with it "a skilled and trained user would aim to stab and pierce his enemy rather than hack as a barbarian would with an axe" (6). Though John's analysis proceeds through an interview of his grandfather to his thesis rather than through the use of

metaphors, both of these descriptions offer opportunity to explore binaries in the conventional Prownian sense–exploring for ideas in descriptions.[12] The first description indicates that the value of the bayonet is largely communal, as it is commonly used to "mark grounds" and even to scratch out rough battle plans in the dirt. John also indicates a difference in the values of historical eras when he compares the more directed "aim to stab and pierce" of the nineteenth-century soldier with the "hack" of the Barbarian's axe. While these opportunities to create (in Prown's sense) the "fiction" of the saber using metaphors to produce useful binaries for analysis are not really used, it is in the detailed physical description of the blade that John finds the "hook" for his personal/ academic essay. To whit, "The blade is flat on the top so it may house the name of its original owner as well as the date . . . ": "de Lois, 1862."

The problem is that John can find no trace of any "de Lois" in his family tree and so "the idea that an ancestor may have gotten this [saber] legitimately or at all seems unlikely" (7). Ingeniously, John (re)constructs an alternative historical scenario in which one of his "cannon fodder" Irish ancestors "may have stolen it off of the corpse of his superior at the end of a battle in hopes of selling it. The engraving however, made this impossible, so he held onto it and passed it down the line." The fact that John had received the Civil War era saber from his grandfather rather than through his own father did not, in John's opinion, support this theory, "but it was a start."

Up until this point (page 7 of 10), John has displayed the structural knowledge necessary to contextualize his text-in-context essay. He has also chosen an artifact (a beloved family heirloom) and described its reception and valorization (through framing and displaying) as well as providing a detailed description of the object itself. To establish structural values, he has indexed references such as Karl Marx (on "use" value), Thomas Kuhn (on the development of and shifts between paradigms), Aristotle (on Rhetoric) and Ian Hacking (on the ideas of social construction). He has used Jules David Prown and Kenneth Haltman to explain

the basic concepts of Material Artifact Analysis and argued that one can gain great insights not only about past cultures from examining antiques but also that "interpretations can be made from it [the artifact] regarding the present rather than the past." All of this work takes place, mostly, on the academic side of the academic/personal writing binary.

In the last several pages John moves into the personal as he interviews his grandfather, a "seventy nine year old man, [who] lives with his second wife in a small farm ranch . . . " and has his "on-days" and his "off-days," a "memory that is crystal clear" but "trouble with proper wording." John has a list of prompts for his interviewee but quickly discovers that his notes are "utterly useless" when his grandfather, rather remarkably, I think, confesses that the saber has absolutely no connection at all to his family but was bought in an antique shop.

This amount of work (contextualization, description, research, personal interview) and John's ability to gather himself and redirect the interview once his original assumptions were rocked would in many classes be enough (for an amateur 18-year-old writer with reasonable grammar skills) for a solid grade. In my experience, MAA can be stopped productively at any level.[13] But John continues to write that "the importance my grandfather placed in such an object [the saber] in itself can talk much of the culture he lives in" (8). And this is the analysis section of MAA.

Conclusions

How far a student-writer advances with MAA is in large part determined by the sorts of background knowledge the writing class teaches. The students in my courses typically learn how to use several key terms–paradigms, social construction, rhetoric–and so John's paper is informed by these terms and it is, therefore, not surprising that his conclusion seems theoretically well-informed. For example, John writes:

The idea of material culture is not static, but dynamic in the fact that inferences can be drawn about not only the time when the

artifact [relic] was made and used, but also the present time in which the artifact [relic] is studied. Seeing as most artifacts [relics] during the present time are rhetorical, the only way to interpret what they may say about the present culture is to analyze them through rhetorical values placed upon them by the [current] owners of the artifact.

Despite his conflation of the larger category of "artifact" (any object manipulated by humans) with "memento" or "relic" (an antique without current "use value" but only with rhetorical or sentimental value), John demonstrates a useful knowledge of how the value of artifacts is not only created but can change, sometimes radically, from era to era or paradigm to paradigm, as, in this case, a weapon becomes a "legacy."

John concludes his MAA by explaining (and in a way forgiving and even celebrating) his grandfather's decision to construct a legacy of whole cloth. To quote at length from the conclusion of John's MAA:

As my grandfather's reasons for holding on to and distributing an otherwise impractical artifact will show, objects with rhetorical value will transcend time. The object had a purpose back during its time and has, as far as my grandfather is concerned a purpose now [to create a "legacy"]. The pressure from his paradigm . . . made having a legacy far too important. To my grandfather, having a legacy was the one thing he needed to belong within his paradigm. Without a legacy, he would feel that, much like an artifact with no purpose, he would be excluded and maybe openly rejected by his peers. His motives reflect a very common theme within most American paradigms, the need to fit in, to belong. It is with this assertion, that I can now say that, based on my grandfather's actions and value put into the saber, this artifact's metaphorical meaning reflects the common American values of conformity, family, and legacy. Only when an artifact is analyzed within the social context in which [it] currently exists, can one hope to find out what the object may say about the surrounding culture.

While I can argue that John's conclusions and proofs point to a less than complete understanding of the "grandfather" and I may even consider some of these assertions incorrect or too generalized, this student essay does successfully blend disciplinary knowledge with personal writing and I was not bored by this student-writing or felt it overburdened with clichés.

Notes

[2]As Gordon Harvey points out, though " . . . the canon of teachable topics and types of texts has changed excitingly in recent decades . . . the basic [writing] assignments have remained the same" (105).

[3]There are two assumptions in this longstanding and continuing disciplinary debate that need to be regularly interrogated: 1) that students should or must learn to understand (and use) academic language, and 2) that academic language, somehow, is not clichéd. It is clichéd—as this indexation of Bartholomae's rather shopworn "inventing the university" demonstrates.

[4]A classic instance of such a bad prompt appears early in "Inventing the University": "Describe a time when you did something you felt to be creative. Then, on the basis of the incident you have described, go on to draw some general conclusions about 'creativity'" (4). This type of prompt does not require defining terms or acquiring "academic" language or high order reasoning-analysis and usually leads to conclusions that are far too "general," usually some version of the grand pronouncement about "today's society of today." From Edward White's *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating*, a prompt for a "personal experience assignment" asks student-writers to "describe a person you knew well when you were a child . . . " (126-27), which leads, inevitably, back into pre-established narratives like "the dead grandmother" story—indeed White's sample essays from these prompts include "Uncle Bill" and "Gramps" and at best a "fourth grade memory" that begins "[L]ooking back, practically the first thing I think of when I remember her is her behind . . ." (125). A "favorite" bad prompt of mine came from one of my first Teaching Advisors, who suggested that I ask students to "write about an apple from a Martian's point of view." This prompt, while it might stimulate imagination, does not generate practical academic discourse. Rather than spurious prompts like these, I now ask students to consider how their world views and even their evaluations of the people in their lives are shaped by the paradigms they inhabit, the sets of beliefs and assumptions about what makes a grandmother worthy of an

encomium, rather than the generalized encomium itself, that creates, not any sort of academic discourse or good personal writing. Ultimately, my prompts re-imagine the "personal" for an academic context. See also *College English 66:1*, Special Issue: "The Personal in Academic Writing," guest edited by Jane E. Hindman.

[5]For "paradigms," I use Stephen Bonnycastle's "Paradigms, Paradigm Change, and Interpretation," *In Search of Authority: An Introductory Guide to Literary Theory*; for "social construction," see Ian Hacking's "Are You a Social Constructionist?"*;* for rhetoric, Aristotle's *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*.

[6]For a fairly recent revisitation of the "personal" versus "academic" arguments of Elbow and Bartholomae (et al.), see Rebecca Mlynarczyk's "Revisiting the Debate." It is not an intention of this essay to enter this fray but rather to demonstrate in a specific assignment how, at least, this binary can work cohesively if not seamlessly in one writing assignment. The material artifact analysis is only one assignment through which students achieved the generative blending of the personal and the academic: I also assign essays incorporating numeracy literacy and analysis using the psychosocial methodology of criminologists Gadd and Jefferson.

[7]An "artifact" in this context is virtually any "object" that has been manipulated some way by humans from oncomouse or a tattooed human body to the Statue of Liberty: All art is artifact but not all artifacts are considered art.

[8]Prown maintains that Material Culture is an "object-based branch of cultural anthropology or cultural history" (11).

[9]Haltman lists the steps in MAA as description, deduction, speculation, research, interpretive analysis and contends that MAA is "less an explanatory than an exploratory practice" (9). Prown explains MAA more as creating a "fiction" based on metaphors extracted from the description of the artifact (these metaphors usually based in oppositional binaries). Prown maintains that these fictions are more honest and dependable than "histories" since they are less self-consciously constructed as meaningful. The same is said of art vs. artifact; that the artifact is more honest as a reflection of cultural values than art.

[10]Though I will say that even the "dead grandmother story" is indescribably more enjoyable to read as a MAA about MaMaw's false teeth than the conventional encomiums.

[11]Even if advanced levels of analysis are not possible, at virtually any level of writing ability, thick description is useful in training students to be(come) more observant and to write description in an orderly manner; these are practical lessons in and of themselves

[12]Using MAA, students' descriptions move from the physical to the conceptual, from observation to analysis, following Prown's idea of the "textual metaphor," or "metaphors based on the feeling of the experience," for example, "cheerful, comfortable, reliable, grandmotherly, and so forth" (19). "Jasmine," for example, transitions from describing the generic, physical binary hard/soft into discussing the conceptual binary of male/female, but she then manipulates that obvious binary to create a unique personal statement about her own femininity as a negotiation between "hard" and "soft," between her aggressive intellectual and more conventionally feminine style-conscious "selves." She is establishing her feminist position and telling her personal story *through* the MAA, rather than making generic claims that lead to the creation of a predictable and reductive version of her complex "self." In "Sal"'s case, he observes a postmodern sculpture of a male human being with deer antlers and, from that, creates the binary of human/animal. He is then able to grapple with his masculinity via deconstructing this binary. "Lauren" observes that her chosen religious artifact is white and black, so her textual metaphor is "contrast," which she uses to consider her own concerns about her religious faith.

[13]For some more basic-level classes simply picking an artifact of interest and describing it in detail with some plan of action informing that description suffices for a useful assignment. At more advanced, including graduate levels, higher levels of analysis are attempted.

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