

Writing and Time, Time and the Essay

Douglas Hesse

In mid-May, I got to speak to an audience of student writers at DePaul University in Chicago. My youngest daughter Paige graduated from DePaul a couple years ago, so the trip was tinted with nostalgia. Paige now lives in Los Angeles, where she writes for Southern California Public Radio and additionally toils from 5:00 to 8:00 am at a Beverly Hills dog kennel. She can attest that the poop from dogs of B-list movie stars smells the same as the poop from your dogs.¹

Still, as I told those students, Paige is making money as a writer, and these days that might strike some people as a little exotic and odd. Ours is largely an age of sound and image, YouTube and Instagram, where writing gets dolloped in *tapas*-sized scoops, where reading is snacking except for occasionally following the exploits of dragon-tattooed girls or teenaged archers in a society that makes kids kill each other. Sure, there's lots of writing going on. It's just that relatively little of it happens in extended chunks drafted and revised over time. We link and comment. We master the *bon mot*, we excel at snark. For every fledgling essayist or memoirist, there are a thousand status updaters, tweeters, and pinners. Of course, that ratio has probably been true for decades or centuries. But what's striking about our current times is the seeming cultural desire to begrudge writing in general, to wish it away, to hope it simply pops up when we need it, to have it done quickly, for a quick fix, then on to the next thing.

As I mingled with young writers that pleasant night in Lincoln Park, I contrasted their spirit with one just a couple miles south, on Wacker Drive, at the edge of the Chicago loop. A company there is called Narrative Science, and its motto is "We transform data into stories and insight." Their home page is worth considering at some length:

As the volume of data continues to rise exponentially, companies need a better way to use, monetize and understand the data they already have.

Narrative Science helps companies leverage their data by creating easy to use, consistent narrative reporting—automatically through our proprietary artificial intelligence technology platform.

We also help publishers who are faced with the constant challenge of keeping up with the speed, scale and cost demands of content creation.

No doubt, reporting last week's widget sales or covering the Estes Park town council doesn't require quite the burnishing polish of a Jori Graham poem. But I have to wonder, quite seriously, what the end game is when we start presuming writing is too much bother to produce.

Or to read. Spring produced the latest flurry of articles about computers scoring student writing as accurately as people. As usual, psychologists and linguists devised algorithms that assign values to chains of words and synonyms, to sentence lengths and types, to other syntactic and stylistic markers. Machines can score for formal features, and

¹ With light editing, this is the keynote talk, albeit here without images, that I presented at the AEPL Summer Conference on June 30, 2012, in Estes Park, Colorado. —DH

in some cases, they're fairly decent at it. They're less good at deciding whether the writer has said anything intelligent or worthy. My friend Les Perlman at MIT has annoyed testing companies for years by coaching students to write nonsense essays that score very well. They can actually do okay with a sentence like, "When Benito Mussolini first synthesized hydrogen in 1492, it exemplified the nascent economic prowess of Paraguay." The key is using a sophisticated vocabulary, some key words like "thus" or "nonetheless," and above all, writing a lot.

Now, folks have pursued the grail of machine graded writing for 30 years. As someone interested in artificial intelligence, I find much of this work fascinating—but not because I hope we can figure it out. Addressing the problem opens another path to learning how people think and writing works. But I'm worried about our motives. I doubt that we'll somehow activate Skynet or conjure some Schwarzneggerian Terminator. Rather, I fear that if people look only at writing in formalistic ways, something adjudicated by software, writing loses its reason for existing in the first place, which is to create ideas, to create relationships, to constitute societies and subgroups, to sustain people.

In my dystopic future, the Narrative Science computers would just send content to the scoring computers. People would get out of the loop and let the machines talk to each other. At least, the imagined computers' book club wouldn't need tea cakes.

Several readers are probably too young to recall the original Star Trek series, though no doubt insufferable baby boomers have inflicted Kirk, Spock, and McCoy on you. In one episode they beam down to a planet locked in a centuries-old war. Suddenly, the planet's leaders announce that a major battle has just taken place. Kirk and crew are baffled. There's been no obvious fighting. It turns out that the two warring cultures gave up physical combat hundreds of years previously. The war now happens as a computer simulation, with the pointed twist that when the machine spews out casualties, people obediently march into disintegration chambers. As you might guess, Kirk finds the whole thing barbaric, destroys the battle computer, and as usual gets a few red-shirted guys killed.

Now, I'm not saying that machine writing and reading are like computer-hosted wars, and I'm not saying that writing is fighting, though sometimes it feels that way. I am defending writing as more than an annoyance to be gotten rid of, relegated to lackeys or sloughed to silicon chips. Writing is hard for a reason, in the same way that running a marathon or finding a spouse or attending your father's funeral is hard: it's a fundamental human act.

When I was 18, I assumed that people who were "real writers" nonchalantly channeled thought into prose, and I just needed to learn their tricks. Well, I've learned some tricks, and I teach them to students, but I eventually figured out that the tough stuff of writing *is* the thoughts. Of course, you don't have to write to think. But writing keeps you honest. Either you have a 45-minute talk on a Saturday morning or you don't. Either the talk is compelling or it sucks. Like a sadistic gym teacher, writing disciplines you into thinking and confronts you with your shabby results.

Perhaps for those reasons, I struggle to sustain writing these days. I write five or ten minutes before a question takes me to a Google search, and while I'm there I check email and Facebook and a listserv or two. Maybe that side hike sends me up a box canyon before back to the text I'm supposedly composing. My exceptions to this pied mode

of production—and I'll talk about one in a few minutes—happen on projects with no pressing rhetorical situation or expectant audience save me and my best imagined friends.

For other sorts of writing, the far down-the-road gratification of a published piece just barely outpaces the present pull to do anything but focus. Forget the future readers. Immediate ones wait now, and I can reach them as well with a link or a snapshot.

I have some tricks to keep my mind in the game, of course, mainly mode and place. I still relish writing by hand with a plentiful pen, both for the feel and for creating an obvious artifact. I know my laptop is full of me, but I have to open files to see the traces, displayed there in pixelled uniformity. Handwriting leaves the physical trace, the unique artifact. So when I'm playing verbal hooky, I go to the paper pad.

There's the trick of place, too. I'm not a coffee shop writer. I get nervous and guilty sitting there long, and a couple cappuccinos is my limit. I'm a library writer or a picnic table writer.

Last week I was stymied on this talk. This was even though I figured you for a friendly bunch, and I liked the topic I'd set. But I was writing in fits and starts, and I was starting to fret. Friends here in Estes Park offered me their cabin for a day. My wife was in Pennsylvania, and the cabin didn't have internet, so I loaded my dogs Maddie and Toby and drove north from Denver.

In the afternoon I wrote on the porch, watching hummingbirds tease the feeder. At one point there was great dog excitement. A chipmunk scurried through the dirt, and instinctively Toby lunged. To his great surprise and my dismay, he snipped and crippled it, then stood back in wonder, puzzled that the critter wasn't going to play. When I got there the poor chipmunk lay gasping on its side, legs a kilter. I reflexively picked up a heavy rock, enacting my rural Iowa roots to put it out of its misery.

I flashed to last fall. One midnight, Becky woke me up. Our fourteen-year-old cat, Blossom, was having some kind of final seizure, and Becky, having watched her share of pets die over the decade, couldn't deal with this one. We'd been watching Blossom in a decline measured by half-eaten bowls of food, and we'd decided against a third surgery.

Blossom lay on the basement floor, on her side, gasping, legs twitching, glassy-eyed, mostly in some other place. I wanted to do something, but the only thing to be done was to hasten her death, and the ethics of that situation were vexed. Actually, they were totally screwed. What counted as caring here? I've held a dog as a vet put her down, so I've been an agent of death, but in those moments I could imagine myself as comforter. Now there were no syringes or consoling protocols. It was midnight, and what was at hand were my hands. The idea of Blossom's last moments confused by a caregiver become killer was horrible. So I just sat with her for fifteen minutes, and she died. Though I thought then and now that I'd done right just to sit, I couldn't avoid that typically male, typically paternal doubt that I should do something. I felt the same incrimination that E. B. White feels in "The Death of a Pig," the same wonder that Virginia Woolf recognizes in "The Death of the Moth," or decades later, what Annie Dillard recounted in her own version of a moth's death in *Holy the Firm*.

You see what I've done here, don't you, and you're possibly annoyed. I've gone from

describing a cultural antipathy toward writing to narrating my own collusion with it. From there was an anecdote that digressed to yet another anecdote, and now we're at least two mountain ridges from the topic of writing. It's ramble capped, complicated, and weakly justified by invoking writers in the nonfiction pantheon. I've performed the associative progression of the personal essay—composition by connection. If this is going to turn out as anything other than lazy self-indulgence, then everything has to be seen as fitting together in the end, the parts entailing one another, making a story by intention and design. When William Hazlitt described "The Indian Jugglers" in his essay by the same name, when he described how they kept four brass balls aloft "like meteors or flowers," Hazlitt of course was describing the essayist's challenge (126). He was writing in 1828, by the way, which I know because I stopped writing to look it up, and on the way I stopped by Facebook.

Ah, Facebook.

I'm struck by this new technology's unlikely connection to the tradition of diaries, notebooks, and journals. While writing may have started in cuneiform clay conceived for commerce, it wasn't long before people wrote to make art and wrote to make friends. Letters and postcards led to emails and tweets, to flicker and Facebook, for the sheer purpose of making ourselves extensive and connected. Writing inscribes us among others.

It also inscribes us for ourselves. Mark Zuckerberg and friends grasped that fact last year when they devised Timeline. I was fascinated by some of the earliest language used to promote it:

[Y]our profile will become a scrapbook documenting your entire life, all the way back to your birth. Facebook will become a record of your existence. . . . Facebook knows you better than you know yourself. (Cashmore)

Really? Really? In a strange sense that could be true, if you equated "knowing" with "remembering." The chance to capture fleeting experience has always been a promise of writing. I regularly read an old notebook or email and meet an experience I don't remember having lived at all. This happens more when you're in your 50s and paying your youngest daughter's student loans.

But "knowing yourself" involves more than memory. It involves more than documenting the bacon and watercress sandwich that you had for lunch, the awesomeness of that band and that club last night, your cryptic pissed-offedness at someone for some reason that you're not going to explain because you like the dramatic veiled victimage, thank you very much. Like the good folks at Narrative Science, Facebook recognizes that the data of your life is overwhelming and messy. Like Joan Didion at the beginning of "The White Album," Facebook recognizes that we live "by the imposition of a narrative line on the shifting phantasmagoria of experience" (11). But unlike Joan Didion, Facebook has decided to spare you from that imposition. It will do it for you and claim to know you better than you know yourself.

Two things intrigue me. Most obvious, of course, is how the technology replaces writers as agents of the selves constructed from their bits and tags. Consider the nature of the thus-made you, an accretion of blurbs, beads on a temporal string. What's missing is connection and reflection, exploring what you make of the beads, their relation beyond

“before” and “after.” Your time-lined you resembles those Norton Editions of *Jane Eyre* or *Wide Sargasso Sea* that have readers discern Brontë’s or Rhys’s lives from their chronologies in Appendix C. Disconnected dots flatter the reader’s ingenuity; they evoke the modernist despair of a fractured world. But making only dots, however artful, is an exercise in short moments, abjuring the deeper time of trying to state meaning—not only imply it.

I plea, then, for writing that takes time, both measured by episodes marked by butts in the chair but also episodes shaping over days and weeks. I’m not saying that such writing is nobler than the quick sprints of contemporary composition; it just provides a healthy counter-balance to frenetic fragmentation. Our writing ecologies need an increment of slow, and the sobering news is that we can resort to peculiar measures to find that pace and time.

Over a year ago, Nancy Sommers, Kathleen Yancey, and I set ourselves to a writing compact. The deal was this. We’d each choose an object or two and write about it for an hour each day, 30 days straight. No excuses. We’d present something from this experience at the CCCC meeting, which we did in March. After 30 days, I’d amassed 30,000 words and 60 pages of autobiography and exploration. Please indulge me for a few minutes while I give you a slice of that talk from Louisville. I promise a point at the end, and if you heard it there, just think of it as something like hearing Bob Dylan perform “Maggie’s Farm” for the sixth or twentieth time.

I chose to write about two objects, a music folder and a trombone. When I joined the Colorado Symphony Chorus in 2007, I bought its recommended folder, a pebbly cardboard thing, with a hand loop on the spine. A strap connects the sides, keeping its opening to 80 percent. Since 2007, probably 40 works have passed through the folder, from *Carmina Burana* to Beethoven’s 9th to now, the Mozart C-Minor mass.

The Colorado Symphony Chorus is my latest in a life spent singing. In third grade, I joined the children’s choir at Grace Lutheran Church, DeWitt, Iowa, Hazel Soenkson, director. We sat in four rows, youngest kids in front, the back anchored by sixth grade girls singing alto, and I thought harmony the most surprising delight. We had no folders. In this choir I sang my first solo, a third verse.

[sung]

Fair are the meadows

Fairer still the woodlands

Robed in flowers of blooming spring. (Anon.)

My trombone playing is almost as venerable as my singing. I started in fourth grade, with a horn handed down from my cousin Mitch, a varsity fullback already gone bald. There were three immediate challenges to a nine-year old trombonist. One was emptying the spit valve lest the horn started popping like a two-cylinder lawn mower. You died of embarrassment when Sherri Parrot, the cute alto sax player sitting in front of you turned around. Later I learned sloughing spit was no big deal for cool players, like Trombone Shorty. Only nerds were shy. By the way, there is no nerdier player than *Star Trek Next Generation’s* Commander William Riker, played by Jonathan Frakes, past member of the Penn State Marching Band.

Keeping your slide slippery was challenge two. Slide oil came in two ounce bottles

that looked like nose spray. My slide was untrue, its finish corroded. I thought more oil would help, and I'd apply so much that glissanding from sixth position to first was like inhaling exhaust.

Challenge three was sixth position. Trombones actually have seven, but no fourth grader can really reach sixth, at least not in tune. In fifth grade band, I was last chair trombone. Rehearsals terrified me. Miss Steele would go through the section and have each kid play, one at a time, until she discovered the source of discord, which became the source of your shame. Miss Steele resembled my current symphony chorus director Duane Wolfe, who's won two Grammys. His rehearsal technique favors quick reps, perhaps punctuated with "Awful!" or "Count" or "Make it better" or simply "Again." The second time you have a sense of how you screwed up previously, and the third time you're polishing, and the fourth time you've got it. The pedagogy of glower and grin. Duane figures that it's not as if your bad technique or wrong note was the consequence of some rationale decision. It's muscle memory and ear. Duane is a mean Peter Elbow.

By ninth grade, which was 1970, when I bought my Olds Studio Model trombone, I'd learned to use a creamy stuff called SuperSlick. You smeared a tiny bit, then sprayed a light mist, worked the sleeve back and forth, buffing. By ninth grade I could play sixth position in tune, and I could reach seventh. That year I bought the Olds Studio model for \$300, which was my life savings when I was 14.

Key Change

It's seventh grade, and I'm auditioning for the *Mikado*. Fifty of us sit in chairs while Miss Lamonica, the gym teacher, and Miss Eggleston, the music teacher, go down the row. They point, and you sing eight bars. Kids are surprised I can sing. I'm a dork, the last boy in school with a flattop haircut. I'm cast as Pish Tush and have the first song of the whole operetta, the exposition:

[sung]
Our great Mikado, virtuous man,
When he to rule the land began,
Resolved to try
A plan whereby
Young men might best be steadied.
So he decreed in words succinct
That all who flirted, leered, or winked
(Unless connubially linked)
Should forthwith be beheaded. (Gilbert)

The song starts on a low note that my twelve-year-old self can't yet sing, so they had me start on the higher octave.

I play the police sergeant in *Pirates of Penzance*. These first roles establish an acting trajectory of authority figures. In a schlocky musical called *Fly Me to the Moon*, I play a high school principal. I MC the school variety show. I'm the dependable kid who won't screw up. Mr. Brownlow in *Oliver*. The Captain in *South Pacific*. The only variation was my senior year, Sky Masterson, in *Guys and Dolls*. Decades later, from my thirties to late

forties, I do community theater, until my last role, the Rabbi in *Fiddler on the Roof*. The ego gap back to Masterson has grown too vast, so I quit the stage.

I started at the University of Iowa as a chemistry major. I was a member of the Marching Band, which in the mid-1970s was nothing like today's exuberant cults. In my second game, we played Penn State, and coming off the field at halftime, I knocked into Joe Paterno. Marching got old after sophomore year, so I auditioned for the Old Gold Singers, a 28 voice swing choir, a sort of *Glee* of its day. We did Broadway, pop, and jazz classics, all with choreography. We sang three weekends each year on campus, and we took spring tours to New York and New Orleans. But my favorites were shows we did around the state of Iowa, for Chambers of Commerce and high school assemblies. At the Clinton County Pork Producers, I sang a solo in a close-harmonied jazz song.

[sung]

When I give my heart,

It will be completely.

Or I'll never fall in love. (Young)

Now and then, I've been one of the better singers in an ensemble, but these days it's inevitably then, and the proof is decisive. Last August in Aspen, the opera singer Twyla Robinson chose to sing a solo from the chorus. I was standing in the center of the first row, so they put her beside me, figuring I'd be nice. I was. During pauses, we talked about her garden in Texas. I was stunned by Robinson's breathing. She'd start half a measure before coming in, a slow steady, powerful intake, storing energy like a braking Prius. Robinson was also soprano soloist for the Mahler Second Symphony, the Resurrection, which has four stunning movements. The chorus enters in the middle of the fifth, *pianissimo, a capella*, and builds from there to perhaps the most chilling dynamic marking in all of choral music, "Mit hochster Kraft," with maximum force. It's marked *fff* but really it means something like "Everything you've got; just go nuts."

So, I've spent most of my life in music, and yet I've known since fourth grade that I'm a musical poser. That year we all took an aptitude test that involved listening to several tones and deciding which was higher and lower, louder and softer, and so on. I failed. Recently, I tried to figure out what the exam might have been, most likely the "test of musical talent," invented by University of Iowa psychologist Carl Seashore. In these pre-digital days, Seashore had to design all sorts of machines that could render and measure sounds precisely. One of my favorites was the tonoscope, which determined and represented how precisely listeners could judge isolated sound intervals. Today he'd have made the Topic Sentence O'Scope. Anyway, the school sent results to help parents decide whether to spend money on a clarinet. Apparently I was a bad risk.

I think of all that would have changed had my parents heeded that test, or had I. I would not have played with the Findlay College band, when my colleague Jack Taylor needed a ringer and offered me a case of home-brewed ale. I would not have sung the Verdi *Requiem* in Vienna's *Stephansdom*. I would not have played polkas for a wedding reception in an Iowa barn or five services each Easter in a brass quartet. I would not have played my trombone beside my son Andrew when he was six and learning the cello, the two instruments being in the same range, at least for beginners.

I think of testing now, especially high stakes exams in writing, measures not only of students but also of teachers. It was probably true that, according to Dr. Seashore's test, I had little aptitude. However, that test didn't measure whether you'd sung "Beautiful Savior" as an third grader, whether your mother's favorite musician was Tommy Dorsey, whether you'd be willing to spend your life's savings at fourteen on an Olds Studio Model trombone.

I think, further, of schools stripping away music for basics, stripping everything for the basics, even writing done to its most transactional, practical, and testable. No time for the aesthetic and poetic. We can't afford it, and the kids really don't need it. They need skills, not arts. And they surely don't need to produce exploratory long writings in genres like the essay, combining experience, reading, and idea for the wayward purpose simply of figuring where the text might go. They need conciseness to the point, clarity and confidence. This is a competitive world, dammit, and if you shilly-shally, the Chinese will take your jobs.

Ok, you're thinking. Enough, Doug, you're thinking. Enough with this self-indulgent parataxis. You're right, so here's some analysis of four aspects of the Yancey-Sommers-Hesse writing experiment. First consider the duration over weeks, a thirty day commitment focused on one project. It's hard to make time these days for sustained writing, to know that tomorrow and next week you're going to be writing on this project—and just for the sake of writing, not to finish a dissertation, not to earn tenure, not for any goal except to write. Second consider the individual writing increment. I'm at my computer probably 6 or 7 hours a day, but I found an hour of writing concentrated in this fashion a surprisingly long spell. All sorts of gravitational forces, technological, vocational, cultural and personal, many of them pleasant and many of them not, wrench me away from the focused act.

The focus is the third element. Writing thirty hours in thirty days is one thing, but writing on a single object is quite another. Of course, I chose things saturated with meaning, so they were a pull. But I couldn't let myself exhaust them, even after day seven or day 22. The external demand to spend the time propelled me into surprising memories and ideas. There was no rhetorical exigency but, rather, the essayistic tradition that has made writers for centuries ponder the smallest matter to invest it with significance. It's what made my sadly suicided friend David Foster Wallace turn a visit to a Maine lobster festival into a biological and philosophical excursion into whether crustaceans feel pain and what either answer means for eaters. It's what makes a blocked writer on an Estes Park porch reflect on killing a chipmunk hurt by a playful dog.

The final lesson is the power in withholding publication, at least for a time, figuring out when the text might ready, going deep into the morass of prose. It's simpler to spin new language, to send the Facebook post, to browse the Internet, the day, the life. Trading the available "now" for the still-imagined "then" means writing for deferred reward. It bets on satisfaction that may not come, for audiences that may not care. To winnow and revise—to connect life's stuff, diffuse in chronology, concept, and place—is to barter the small sure thing for something hazy. Essays have no algorithms, and yet given time they have promise.

In writing this talk, you see, I've made a second return to those original 30 days of writing, revising my revision, embedding Professor Seashore's tonoscope in the world of Narrative Science and Facebook Timeline. I've spoken my trombone into a Louisville ballroom only to conjure it anew today, at a Y camp in the Rockies. In a sense, I started drafting today's talk long before I even received Wendy and Irene's kind invitation to Estes's rare air, before I knew your names and faces. During our thirty day experiment, Kathi, Nancy and I debated what counts as time toward our hour's allotment. Suppose mid-sentence I wonder about the Olds musical instrument company, so I look up the factory's history on line. Suppose the memory of Hazel Soenkson sends me to the basement, to find my band album from fifth grade. Am I writing if I'm looking things up midstream—because writing impels me to do so—but maybe not, if I haven't begun? What's "pre writing?" Isn't all of life?

Sure—though technically, you have to at least and at last write a few words. With contemporary expectations and technologies, that's a pretty low threshold. I ask for something more substantial than recording the occasional minutes of our lives, however voluminously, often in disconnected bits, siftable by technologies whose inventors fancy that they've thereby "written" on our behalf, sparing us the bother. I ask for living with writerly intent. By that, I mean believing that experience justifies writing, yes, but also that life warrants re-inscription. It means accepting that returns to past selves and texts take time, in an age not particularly conducive to waiting or uncertainty, accepting the possibility that coherence may elude essaying from things not lived coherently. A daughter in Los Angeles, Grace Lutheran Church, an Olds trombone, *Star Trek*, the *Mikado*, William Hazlitt, Gustav Mahler, a dying cat, a Saturday in mountains hazed with wildfire, three songs: all of these singly are but shimmered glints. With time and design, they stand gathered, however meekly, against the grand dispassionate Timeline. I appreciate your invitation today to make something of them and, perhaps, myself.



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