

Saving a Place for Essayistic Literacy

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LESTER FAIGLEY AND SUSAN ROMANO RECENTLY ENCAPSULATED THE ONGOING argument that computer networks disrupt traditional assumptions about advanced literacy. Following anthropologists Ron and Suzanne Scollon, they refer to the old framework as essayistic literacy, writing practices characterized by texts of a certain length, complexity, and expected integrity. Essayistic literacy supports process pedagogies that have been ascendant in the past thirty years and thus is conserved by familiar and dominant teaching strategies, perhaps out of proportion to its value. In contrast, writing common to computer networks is terse, mostly single-draft, often composed in immediate response and not repose, dependent on pathos and humor to a much greater extent than usually sanctioned by essayist literacy. Students frequently find it more familiar and worthy of pursuit, and Faigley and Romano urge writing programs to take seriously students' demands for "an education they perceive as relevant to the twenty-first century and not the nineteenth" (57). They stop short of saying that network literacy should define literacy, but they advocate its broader place in the curriculum.

By calling the old tradition essayistic literacy, Faigley and Romano perpetuate a definitional confusion at least a century old. As Robert Scholes and Carl Klaus observed nearly 30 years ago, "essay" has "come to be used as a catch-all term for non-fictional prose works of limited length" (46). There's no doubting the term's prevalence on campuses, where students perceive everything they write as an "essay" or "paper." Although faculty in certain disciplines or courses may have students write reports, memos, or other genres, they typically do not have undergraduates write articles—or at least don't call them that. But "articles" would more appropriately be the object of concern, and complaints would more accurately be against "article-istic" literacy.

My argument is occasioned at least partially by a desire to wrestle back for the "essay" its history. I'll confess selfish interest in this goal because the genre has been an object of my professional publication. I sympathize with Carl Klaus's quite serious proposal at a gathering of essayists and essay apologists that we agree each to use Montaigne's original French, *essai*, and forfeit the corrupted "essay." However, I'm realistic enough to know that Kleenex and

Xerox both failed to control names used in the popular sphere. Besides, the issue is more than definitional quibbling. We occlude important literacy issues if we misunderstand what might be meant by essayistic literacy.

Faigley and Romano acknowledge the breadth of the term when they make a definitional partition—but then define the whole from the part:

In essayist literacy, “good” writing is defined by those characteristics most prized in an academic essay. In a “good” piece of writing, logical relations are signaled, references to sources carefully documented, and statements of bias either absent or well-controlled. The presence of these features signals to readers that the author is truthful and that what he or she writes may legitimately pass for knowledge. Appeals to pathos as conventionally understood, unless carefully managed are apt to discount author credibility. Both writer and readers are imagined as rational and informed people not inclined to excessive passion, fragmented reasoning, or posturing. (47)

By this definition, in which essayist literacy is defined by the academic essay, Montaigne, the very father of the genre, did not possess essayist literacy. After all, his writings frequently fail to signal logical relations, and his biases are foregrounded like his famous moustache. As “academic essays,” his explorations of smells and cannibalism would fail undergraduate biology or anthropology courses. I’m not objecting to Faigley and Romano’s depiction of the kind of writing deemed most appropriate for the academy; I’m fairly certain that professors who assign writing mostly do expect these qualities. Rather, I’m saying that these qualities do not define essays.

The confusion about “essayistic” literacy is perhaps best sorted by considering lines of thinking since the mid-1980s in three scholarly fields: the essay as genre, social constructivist theory, and network literacy theory. Scholars working in each of these fields have tended to regard the others primarily as sources of ideas to oppose. For example, apologists for the essay have tended to promote the genre to resist what they perceive as the dehumanizing effect of social constructivism. Simultaneously social theorists have scorned what they perceive as the untheorized romanticism of the essayists. Theorists of network literacy, by which I mean reading and writing not continuous and “self-contained” linear texts but rather distributed, context-embedded, spatial texts, similarly repudiate the essayistic. They fear that the genre manifests theoretically suspect assumptions of stable knowledge and pragmatically naive assumptions about the kind of writing that college graduates will actually need to do. And yet all these fields aspire to relatively similar characteristics of student writings, whether they can acknowledge it or not.

WHAT IS AN ESSAY?

Within the academy the term “essay” has evolved into a generic term for all works of prose nonfiction short enough to be read in a single sitting. But the genre’s history and the qualities of its defining texts make clear that essays are a

specific kind of nonfiction, one defined in opposition to more formal and explicitly conventional genres—the scientific article or report, for example, or the history, or the philosophical argument. Whereas these latter genres have aspired to objective truths through the constraints of method, enacting the Lockean dream of language beyond the idols of language, essayists have pursued conditional representations of the world as the essayist experiences it. Some might critique this stance as solipsistic romanticism. But it can alternatively be viewed as an ultimate rejection of knowledge as objective and truth as independent of context and experience. Social constructivism shares this position. Essayists declare the contingency of their claims about the world by rejecting method and the self-effacement of form. Instead they constantly figure themselves as the makers of that knowledge. Edward Hoaglund’s formulation that the essay exists on a line between “what I think and what I am” is revealing for what it does not declare, namely, that the essay does not say “what the world is.”

This is perhaps too abstract, so let me take another run at it. By essay, I mean that tradition of works initiated by Montaigne, begun in English by Bacon, continued through Cowley, Addison and Steele, Johnson in *The Rambler*, Goldsmith in *The Bee*, Ben Franklin, Lamb and Hazlitt, Emerson and Thoreau, Woolf, Orwell, E.B. White, Didion, Dillard, Hoaglund, Scott Sanders, and so on. Constructing any such partial list invites charges of canon-making and promotes the genre as celebrating a literary aesthetic. I’m just trying to clarify the kinds of works I mean. The essayistic can be located today in much journalism, Ellen Goodman’s or Anna Quindlen’s columns, for example, or the works of science popularizers or naturalists like Stephen Jay Gould or David Quammen. For all these pieces, the author’s experience and consciousness in pursuit of an idea determines the content and form of the essay, not some external “topic” or “method.” So it is that in “Reflections in Westminster Abbey,” Addison can “digress” about the quality of Dutch monuments to dead admirals or that in “Human Equality is a Contingent Fact of History” Gould can discuss how the Spirit of St. Louis ought to be represented for blind visitors to the Smithsonian.

In fact, one characteristic quality of contemporary essays is the attempt to cast the widest net of associations possible, then struggle to bring the gathered ideas into some meaningful relation. Annie Dillard’s “Expedition to the Pole” intricately weaves an autobiographical strand, her experience attending a folk service at a Catholic church, with an informational strand, accounts of preparations for various arctic and antarctic expeditions, to create a metaphor for how we ought and ought not encounter the sacred and the strange. Joan Didion’s “The White Album” consists of several apparently disconnected snippets of California life in the late 1960s. Didion famously asserts that “We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images” (11). It is that narrativizing of experience, information, and idea—the imposition and making plausible of a certain sequence of textual moves—that characterizes the essay.

My term “narrativizing” may seem an odd one, especially when so many essays don’t consist of what we traditionally might call narratives, the representation of events as they happened or might happen in the world. Yet, as I’ve argued previously (“Time”), essays are emplotments of their author’s experiences, ideas, readings, and so on. A venerable way of talking about essays is to say that they render the shape of thinking, not of thought. Form in an essay is not dictated by conventions of deductive logic or formal convention but rather by the author’s attempt to create a satisfying and finished verbal artifact out of the materials at hand. This is not to say that essays are inherently more natural than other forms of writing; as I’ve also argued previously (“Recent”), our perception of an essay as a “satisfying and finished verbal artifact” is due to our socially constructed expectations as readers. While it has been common to talk about essays as “unmethodical” discourse, as does Lane Kaufmann, in fact they are certainly methodical, just as bound by discourse conventions as other genres. It’s just that the conventions are those of essaying.

The rhetoric of the essay depends on consoling the reader that the world can be made abundantly complex and strange and yet still be shown as yielding to ordering, if not order. In genres like the scientific report, narrativity precedes the content matter, embodied in prescribed elements like the methods, results, and discussion sections; in the essay, the narrative must be constructed out of the subject matter, giving rise to notions of “organic” form. It is telling that the essay’s rise paralleled the rise of the scientific method in the late Renaissance and early Enlightenment and that Francis Bacon, author of “The Advancement of Learning,” should be its first prominent English practitioner. It is as if Bacon himself recognized the limitations of a single method and sought to establish a counter method, one that later essayists would call anti-methodical. His own essays, aphoristic, propositional, and declarative, hardly seem to demonstrate the narrative qualities I’ve attributed to the genre. And yet the movement between his assertions is tentative and exploratory. An essay like “Of Marriage and Single Life” can begin with the claim that “He that hath Wife and Children, hath given Hostages to Fortune” only later to acknowledge the benefits of marriage, so that the whole work narrates an idea evolving.

So far I have been trying to argue that the essay is a sub-genre of short prose, modest and self-limiting in its truth claims, contingent on the perspective of its author, wearing that contingency on its sleeve, constrained not by topic but by the author’s thought process and by conventions of satisfying form—in Kenneth Burke’s most basic definition of form as the arousal and fulfillment of desire—associative, exploratory, essentially narrative rather than hierarchical in its logic. What I have not yet argued is the value of the essay. What is the worth of the genre at a time when computer networks allow, even invite, texts to exist as units approachable from many directions, able to be employed in multiple contexts, digital, malleable, transportable, reproducible? What can essays and essaying do that really needs to be done and can’t happen

another way? Could it be that essaying, after hypertextual technology, can go the way of *memoratio* after wide alphabetic literacy? Perhaps we might agree on a precise definition of essays and, thus, essayistic literacy. Yet we may still determine that such a literacy is pedagogically, theoretically, or politically undesirable.

Several composition theorists have argued just the opposite in recent years. As I noted above, some of this has come in response to 1980s pedagogies of academic discourse, as with many of Jim Corder or Peter Elbow's concerns. Kurt Spellmeyer has been perhaps the most eloquent and rigorous in the articulation of this position. Spellmeyer characterizes pedagogies of discourse-specific analysis and emulation as preventing the kind of inquiry that represents and motivates learning. Worse, it disempowers students by limiting content and form to existing disciplinary conversations to which they must by definition be outsiders, and by excluding the resources of students' own experiences. Spellmeyer contends that

By reifying discourse communities as teachers reified texts a generation ago, we disempower our students in yet another way; whereas before they were expected only to look to an author's language, their task now is more complicated and more intimidating, to speak about such language in terms of extratextual conventions with which they are almost always unfamiliar. And poststructuralist teachers, enabled by a knowledge of these invisible conventions, wield an authority that would probably have embarrassed their New Critical forerunners. The alternative, I believe, is to permit our students to bring their extratextual knowledge to bear upon every text we give them, and to provide them with strategies for using this knowledge to undertake a conversation that belongs to us all. (119)

For reasons both pedagogical and political, then, Spellmeyer nominates the essay as that genre best suited to promote writing and thinking. Panegyrically, Paul Heilker takes Spellmeyer's position a step further. Deciding, finally, that the essay is nothing less than "transgressive symbolic movement," Heilker asserts that "what the essay highlights is that thought and language resist domestication" (181), that as "kineticism incarnate," the essay is necessarily "an intellectual activity on par with dialectical speech in that it, too, can lead us to wisdom and truth, can allow us to move toward transcendence," the very genre reminding us that "writing is a form of sociopolitical action undertaken to make ourselves better, wiser people and make the world a better, wiser place in which to live" (183).

I'm leery of these aspirations to transcendence and of representations of the essay as pure movement. The essayist's ultimate goal is to create an artifact, an artifact that may figure movement through its narrativity, but an artifact nonetheless, in the way that a film is an artifact, bounded by beginning and end. Movement, the transition from "this" to "that," is only half the essay's mode of being, the other half consisting of the writer's constructing a

well-made whole, transforming narrative to story or mere movement to action. Further, as Joel Haefner has pointed out, claims of the essay's inherently democratic status ignore the fact that it, like every genre, has a history. Any essay—especially a student one—is read against the essay tradition in which certain rhetorical moves are deemed more appropriate than others.

And yet, even though they might vehemently reject the neoplatonist rationales that I've cited above, many social theorists embrace the essay. There are two broad manifestations of social constructivism in composition studies. One is an accommodationist pedagogy in which students analyze target discourses with the goal of reproducing them, critique coming through—and after—understanding the discourse from “within.” Charles Bazerman's *The Informed Writer* enacts such a pedagogy. The other is a resistance pedagogy in which critique drives analysis and serves to expose ways that conventional discourses conceal class, gender, or local circumstance. Proponents of such pedagogies, grounded in feminist theories, for example, have promoted and published scholarly work that more explicitly foregrounds the experience and perspective of the writer. The stance has always been the essayist's.

Lester Faigley's own position in *Fragments of Rationality* is interesting in this vein—and inconsistent with his and Romano's later critique of essayistic literacy. Faigley summarizes postmodernist dismantlings of the possibilities of unified individual consciousness and grand narratives. Vestiges of both these assumptions within composition classes can be seen in the way teachers tend to privilege confessional narratives, in which honesty and truthfulness derive from revealing embarrassing or potentially damaging events. Teachers might more appropriately have their students write what Faigley calls local narratives or microethnographies. In such works, students must observe, record, analyze, and interpret information, but Faigley deems as most valuable “the opportunity for students to explore their own locations within their culture” (223). What he calls microethnography, I would call essay. The confessional narratives that Faigley criticizes have some roots in some essayistic practices: Montaigne's confession in “On Smells,” for example, that he likes the way food and perfume stick to his mustache so he can savor the smells longer, or Orwell's confession that he shot an elephant he did not need to shoot. But in the essay tradition, occasional confessions almost always serve writers exploring their locations within cultures, as does Orwell's shooting the elephant. A critique of “the confessional” is not necessarily a valid critique of the essay, as confession is but one trope practiced in some essays.

I'm not the first to point out that the term essayistic literacy stands defining features of essayism on their head. John Trimbur notes that the former term, coming out of literacy studies rather than literary history and composition studies, “has little to do with the self-revelatory stance, flexible style and conversational tone we find in literary essayists such as Montaigne, Addison, or E.B. White” (72). In fact, Trimbur summarizes David Olson's history of essayistic literacy—the rise of a plain, impersonal style, transparent, the meaning of

texts presented literally in words on the page, all texts self-contained, the world objectively mapped in words—as grounded explicitly in a break with the figurative language and self-revelatory features of writers like Montaigne (76). It strikes me as nearly perverse for scholars like Olson to name the stylistic project of the Port Royal logicians and 17th Century Royal Society after a genre whose practitioners would resist that project. Perverse is probably less appropriately the word than beguiled, in the way that many of us have been beguiled by the convenience of essay as a catch-all term. In any case, trying now to change the label is like being a salmon swimming up the well-dammed Columbia River. Rather, as essayistic literacy is that which computers and computer networks, abetted by postmodern theory, are time and again supposed to challenge, then let's be careful what gets swept under the term. Some of the very qualities associated with literacy online—specifically, movement and exploration in a method more provisional and contextual than methodical—have been true of the essay since its inception.

NETWORK LITERACY AND ANTI-ESSAYISM

In *The Electronic Word*, Richard Lanham sounds a theme that Bolter and Landow before him have sounded and many others have since: reading will—and should—migrate beyond linearly following extended print texts, and writing should accommodate this change. Thus, “the essay will no longer be the basic unit of writing instruction” (127). Computers and, more importantly, computer networks permit and invite writing to come in smaller chunks never designed to be free-standing in the way that articles and essays have been for the past four centuries. This is clearest in works authored as hypertexts or works authored to be housed in hypertextual spaces like the World Wide Web, where perhaps even more salient than what a text says is how it connects. Bolter's pronouncements about hypertext (a prehistoric six years ago, as I am writing), underestimated the direction that hypertextuality has tended. Bolter took as his exemplars large, single authored (at least in origin) hypertexts such as Michael Joyce's “Afternoon.” In fact, through the World Wide Web, we have passed over the bother of creating a generation of texts like “Afternoon.” Rather than large and complex texts initiating their own revision and evolution in hyperspace, network discourse evolves from more modest writings: brief intact texts that exist explicitly in relation to other texts, not parts of themselves, posed questions, for example, or comments on an event. Bolter and Lanham imagined a reading and writing world of glosses, in which readers interactively modified and constructed texts by direct reference. In fact, the Web evolves by accretion, not substitution or critique.

In practice, web pages and the documents they organize do not comment on other documents except by connecting to them; web documents rarely contain analyses, syntheses, or critiques of other web documents. Instead, they contain recommended URLs. A common feature now of celebrity profiles as published in magazines like *Esquire* is a list of the celebrity's favorite bookmarks or websites, which are always presented without explanation.

Here is a difference between essay literacy, as I would have us understand the term, and current practices of network literacy. The earliest essays, Montaigne's for example, consist largely of glosses of the author's reading, her or his bookmarks, if you will. The tradition continued through Virginia Woolfe's *Common Reader* series, transformed into book reviews, the review essay, and the common device of using a reading as a point of departure for some more discursive exploration. It falls on the essayist to explain why he or she had referred to those texts, to narrate the relation of those writings to one another or to the essayist's experience or to the ideas being developed, and these explanations have taken the form of writing explicitly about the connections. Internet writers, in contrast, connect through juxtaposition, not commentary.

Bolter and Lanham have embraced the sufficiency of reading as juxtaposition and writing as addition primarily because such a conception enacts some postmodern positions. If the stability of knowledge is a fiction perpetuated diffusely and even unconsciously by discourse communities whose interest that fiction serves, then forms of communication that expose or refuse that stability have a theoretical purity. The danger, as critics particularly of Baudrillard have noted, is that a landscape leavened by the ultimate equality of all texts offers no fulcrum for advocacy or change. Lanham and Bolter might contend—and I might agree—that a textual space that encourages addition and discourages critique holds open possibilities for change that apparently self-containing texts do not. The difference is that the essay allows the writer to incorporate other texts into her or his own, representing and discussing them in explicit relation to the writer's own ideas and experiences. This is a different kind of agency than merely having one's texts available in the same space as another. Of course, in explicitly representing and embedding others' writings, there is always the possibility of misrepresenting or domesticating, as perhaps I have done with my appropriations of Lanham and Bolter.

HOME PAGE AS ESSAY?

The difference between summarizing and discussing versus presenting and linking is the difference between electronic texts being essayistic or not. Obviously, it's possible and common to publish essays on the Internet, in a form and format similar to mere print. As a journal editor who occasionally has to accommodate requests for back issues, I recognize the potential archival salvations of the Internet. The kind of piece you're reading now exists via home pages up and down the Internet, not only in electronic journals but also in the home pages of individuals who make available copies of conference papers and printed articles. (See, for example, Doug Brent's "Articles on Communications, Information Technology, and Rhetoric.") One could imagine an E.B. White home page containing the "The Death of a Pig," "The Ring of Time," "Once More to the Lake" and so on, that home page linked to essays by other writers, other home pages, and so on.

But when writers like Faigley and Romano call for alternatives to essayistic literacy and imagine appropriate pedagogies and target discourses for students, they are not imagining the essay merely transported onto a file server. One can publish sonnets in hyperspace, too, but there are relatively few arguments these days that the sonnet should be a featured genre in first-year composition. There are two orders of issues at stake, existing in a particle/field relationship. One is the nature of individual texts, some of them certainly essays, in the Internet. The other is the nature of those texts or structures that connect or organize others.

This latter issue can be explored by asking, "When is a home page an essay?" The question is perhaps both more and less odd than it seems, as the home page is an interesting hybrid genre. Like essays, home pages have the function of organizing and presenting a view of something (in this case, other documents, sites or images), and like essays they are developed and managed by a single author (or authorial entity), which distinguishes them from other types of electronic discourse, such as listservs, which I discuss below. Above I tried to suggest that a typical essay gambit is to bring into some meaningful relationship a set of ideas, events, and references that are perhaps not automatically associated with one another, the author's goal being to constellate them in a meaningful structure. Certainly, there are home pages with some of these features, especially those devised by individuals rather than organizations.

One test of a home page as an essay would be to read it as printed out or with its links disabled. Think first of home pages that have the status of directories, consisting of a few sentences of explanatory text but mainly providing buttons or links to other information or documents, an academic department's home page, for example, or a corporation's. Such sites are no more essays than tables of contents are essays. Some principles of inclusion exist and the page can be read in terms of choices made. As with elements included in an essay, things included even in a directory home page "say something" about its author. That Nancy Kaplan's home page, for example, includes a link to the "Compact for Responsive Electronic Writing," along with links to University of Baltimore pages, to "Current and Recent Course Materials," "A Sampler of Projects," "Essays, and Other Stuff," and to "Websites Worth the Whistle" tells much about her activities and interests but little about the connections among the various things represented other than that they are here juxtaposed.

Looking at such home pages is like looking at catalogs of a personal library put up for estate auction. One is left to infer the consciousness that assembled such a library. Kaplan and other "directory page" authors make no claims about the meaning or significance of what is there beyond, perhaps, that "you might find this useful" and "you might find this interesting; I do." Of course, the rhetoric of even directory home pages can be extremely complex in the play among organizational and graphical elements. My point is writers of directory home pages don't explicitly present an interpretation of the page in terms of the relationships among the elements that comprise the whole, at

least not in the way that an essayist articulates (but obviously never completely or exclusively) the relationship between elements of a text.

Now, some essays do rely extensively on pointing and juxtaposition. E.B. White's "Spring" consists of twelve short segments, each separated by white space, the first of them simply announcing "Notes on springtime and on anything else of an intoxicating nature that comes to mind" (186). The chunks present disconnected clips of life on White's farm, the longest of them a narrative of a stubborn brooder stove in his hen house, along with references to events in Europe. However disjointed, "Spring" invites readers to perceive or supply a larger theme holding the pieces together—to hear in the final section on the 1941 Nazi Frühling White's reference to Superman in the second section, and to reinterpret that reference, for example. Perhaps this is largely because of our reading conventions and faith in the author. But White has plotted this reading experience for it. The plotting may be tyrannically linear, tainted with modernist and romantic assumptions about the desirability of our apprehending a theme, enslaved to mere print. Even then, we aren't helplessly stuck with White's theme or point; reader response theory demonstrated the reader's role in constituting texts long before hypertexts did.

Other home pages are more essayistic in that they either embed directory information or links in extended prose or they juxtapose the two. A modest example of the former is Kathleen McHugh's home page, which in 1997 consisted of a large image of an early twentieth-century costumed woman on the left of the screen, the text below on the right and beneath that text a button for Free Speech Online:

*Kathleen McHugh's
Web Extravaganza*

Who is this "[Kathleen McHugh](#)" anyway? And why is she so fascinating?
[The Many Rachels \(and others\) I Know](#). Despite the fact that none of The Many Rachels She Knows currently have home pages, Kathleen has named her Page of People She Knows With Web Pages after them. Kathleen has also been known to wildly invite the people she knows over for bacchanals. Check out the invitation which led to the [Halloween Party](#). Who cares about Kathleen's life and friends? We want to see [zany articles](#) from the early part of the century.

(darkwing.uoregon.edu/~kmchugh/index.html)

Brooks Landon's home page (as of September 1998) is a modest example of a home page that juxtaposes links and extended texts (in the form of quotations, a "Credo, sort of. . ." and "Musings on Multimedia"). Both McHugh's and Landon's home pages glance in the direction of the essayistic by starting to suggest connections among their linked elements. And yet Landon's observation reveals much about what I consider the ultimately anti-essayistic impulse of the home page. Landon writes, "I hope to make this page a place where I can

point to some of the issues and opportunities raised by the Web. I also hope to make it a place where I can just point to things I find interesting.”

One of the main responsibilities of the essayist is to point—at books, ideas, experiences, people, and so on. But essayists interpret their pointing. They narrate reasons why their metaphorical fingers and our metaphorical glances move from this object of attention to that. Some might find home pages ultimately liberating for readers who are “free” to narrate their own interpretations of linkages, the possible whys of the pointings. Of course, such freedom has the cost of intellectual work—unless, of course, one is willing to swap the synchronic or interpretive dimension of reading for the merely diachronic or successive, this screen of images pointing to some next because it is “interesting” in some undefined way or because one is motivated by the drive of finding information. Similarly freed is the author, whose only burden is to point, to find or make links. It’s telling that home pages are yet judged primarily by two criteria: 1) their graphic design, clarity, and seductiveness and 2) the richness of the resources they organize—as constrained by criterion one. Perhaps because of their relative novelty we haven’t yet developed a criterion something like “the quality of thought or analysis” in home pages.

LISTSERV AS ESSAY?

What most theorists celebrate as network literacy is not the ability to write linkable individual essays but rather the ability to negotiate terser data fields. Home pages may serve as gateways for essays stored electronically, but they mainly function now to channel information rather than to convey extended arguments. A clearer sense of the network literacy imperative can be seen in email driven media like listservs or Internet relay chats or Daedalus interchanges, all of which exist because of the interdependency of writings that constitute them. The necessity of interdependency is demonstrated by the dislocation one feels in setting a list on no mail for a period of time, then returning to read messages in stream whose banks are strange and disorienting. After reading awhile, we get a sense of the new geography and perhaps even wade in. Or, more likely, new streams originate, and we follow a discussion from the mouth.

To some extent it’s possible to think of threads on listservs as essays. Heilker has summarized the longstanding depictions of the essay as wandering, exploratory, and unmethodical, with topics or ideas triggered associatively by previous topics or ideas. Certainly all these apply to most listserv threads. A thread begins at one point and moves, if the interest is there, to others until, frequently, someone is inclined to change the subject line because the original one no longer pertains. Rather than associations being driven by the multiple subject positions and experiences of a single author, of course, the listserv distributes associativity among members participating in a thread. But the analogy ultimately breaks down when one compares the finished “product” of a listserv thread with a finished essay. In some ways, threads are clearly finished

when a subject line no longer appears on the list; in other ways, the very notion of a thread being finished runs counter to the spirit of the list that preceded and endured any particular thread. When I grew up in eastern Iowa, we used to go fishing on backwaters and oxbows of the Mississippi, channels of the river and yet not quite the river.

Imagine an experiment in which one takes a discussion thread and, with minimal editing, presents it as an essay. The editing can consist only of removing the summative contextualizing materials, the transitions that become unnecessary and intrusive when messages are presented contiguously with one another; the addition of an introduction or conclusion or a voice-over narrative isn't permitted. Would the result be recognizable as an essay? Even suspending the interesting issues of style and voice, the main quality that threads-as-essays lack is shape and closure.

To illustrate this, I'll discuss an example from a listserv to which I belong, WPA-L. Members of this list are primarily writing program administrators (directors of first-year writing programs and writing centers, for example, or WAC programs) and others interested in program administration. Throughout the fall of 1996 there was a heated and extensive discussion about a situation at a large state university whose prominent writing program director was fired, seemingly out of the blue and seemingly for political rather than professional reasons. Participants on the list wanted to know the facts of the case and, knowing them, wanted to consider reasonable responses. For many, the case involved professional issues about perceptions of what constituted expertise in administering writing courses. Beyond whatever personal regard they had for the WPA and institution involved, their stake was "what happened here might happen here." Many saw this as a defining moment for the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the professional organization informally affiliated with the listserv. Participants in the discussion debated courses of action as well as philosophical and structural issues regarding who had standing in the matter and what standing meant. At one point, a few members argued that the president and vice president of WPA should undertake a fact finding mission to the institution involved, and some even offered to contribute amounts ranging from \$50 to \$100 to pay the way. More discussion. In the end, the members of the list agreed on nothing, nor—and this is my point—could they have, since the genre they were employing resists such agreement. The "essay" of this thread remained a fragment, a very long one, but with none of the shape and form that a "real" essay would have. There was a kind of Freytagian climax. In November, a participant in the discussion visited the institution in question as part of an unrelated invitation, and he reported some extensive and unofficial observations about the situation he discovered. This report was rejoined by a stinging rebuttal, which itself was followed by an even more stinging rebuke by a third discussant. And that was it. It's never certain why threads end. Perhaps WPA-L members had become tired of the issue. Perhaps it was irresolvable. Perhaps they felt catharsis in the final exchange. But the essay of this thread has no consolation of good

form. What the event ultimately meant or what one should think about it was never determined.

I hope this example resonates in a couple of rich frequencies. The exchanges that constitute the thread illustrate dramatically the best of what Faigley and Romano and others might imagine of network literacy. The issues under discussion were scrutinized from several perspectives, and new contingencies continually destabilized hegemonic positions. A variety of writers not only chose but were able to participate. The rhetoric of explicit analysis and argument from principles was complicated and sometimes even trumped by the rhetoric of the bon mot, the rhetoric of passion. And yet the very openness of network literacy, the purity of its enacting postmodern resistances to closure, is ultimately its limitation. Had these issues been rendered through an essay rather than a listserv—and I can virtually guarantee that they will be, just as Linda Brodkey and others essayed the fate of English 306 at Texas—the essay would itself have enacted these resistances. After all, it's in the nature of the genre (the genre "essay" and not the construction "essayistic literacy") to do so.

But an essay would have done something more. It would have "finished" the issues, not in the sense of resolving them once and for all, having the last authoritative word, but in the sense of providing a possible interpretation through the figure of the essay narrator who says, both explicitly and formally through an imposed narrative line, "this is what all of it means to me, now, writing from this position." Interestingly, some of the longer posts in this thread are themselves essays, their writers characterizing issues in the preceding discussion and using them to occasion an extended discussion. Important explorations remain to be done of essayistic messages in listserv threads: under what conditions do they occur? What is their rhetorical effect? Their structural import?

In the main, however, listserv discussions demonstrate "kineticism incarnate" far more thoroughly than do essays. Essays are ultimately constrained by an impetus to form. That's why I consider Heilker's definition of the essay incomplete and why I must concede one point to those who contest essayistic literacy. Yes, the essayist does aspire to create a text that is "self-sufficient." But essays (again, I'm talking about essays, not necessarily articles or reports or other prose forms) convey the strain of their self-sufficiency in ways compatible with social and postmodern theory.

BUT WHY ESSAYISTIC LITERACY IN AN ELECTRONIC AGE?

John Trimbur notes that students tend to read self-reflexive personal essays with the same "deproductive" lens that they read all prose. They regard a fact in an Annie Dillard essay as having the same status as a fact in an encyclopedia article. Part of this, Trimbur notes, may be due to some prose conventions the two genres share. But the reason that students domesticate texts has less to do with the texts themselves than the way they've been taught to read and view reading. The same might be said of reasons for dismissing essayistic literacy.

I have been trying to suggest the role that essay writing should have in the undergraduate curriculum and the larger culture. There is an important value to reading and writing extended, connected texts whose authors manage the double pulls of complexity and order, producing works that convey their status as products of a certain experiential and intellectual nexus, not as objective truth. I believe such writing is consistent with current theoretical tenets, and that any perceived inconsistency comes from assuming that all extended, connected prose is of a piece, driven by early modern goals of perspicuity and unfortunately labeled as essayistic literacy. The personal essay originates and inhabits a very different set of goals. Please note, further, that I'm emphatically not arguing the essay as the sole or even main genre for writing instruction. I'm arguing that it needs to be in the mix.

Theoretical challenges to essay writing are only a part of the issue, and what remains to be answered are pragmatic ones. Faigley and Romano note that many students come to writing classes already experienced in transacting computer networks. Cindy Selfe underscores the voluntary aspect of email, a literate practice that increasing numbers of students and citizens alike elect to perform, a practice that might even be threatened by organized education's disciplining it (281). Various writers in Patricia Sullivan's and Jennie Dautermann's *Electronic Literacies in the Workplace* take as a point of departure the observation that work less and less depends on extended writings by single authors. In light of all this, writers may desire and more clearly need certain literacy skills. Even if theoretically redeemed, the essay may be a relic of a certain conception of liberal education, its dynamic of complication, reflection, and form incommensurate to an age when more pragmatic needs must first be met. Montaigne and Bacon and White, after all, were writing in comparative leisure—though Samuel Johnson was certainly not. In terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the need to be a skilled writer of email may precede the need to write essays. Spellmeyer and Heilker's calls for the essay as a fundamental genre for education—or even Faigley's calls for microethnographies—may miss the reality of where writers are psychologically and materially.

It's conveniently beyond the scope of my essay to explore the issues of vocationalism versus liberal education that I've invoked or the related issues of education for work and education for citizenship. Many values of the essay as genre overlap the values of liberal education, especially those embracing what Coleridge called the "two conflicting principles of free life and the confining form" (24), with free life understood not as unfettered and transcendent agency but as resistance to closure and the bounds of topic and method.

Instead, I offer a small observation, appropriately tinged with Coleridgean romanticism but surprisingly coming via Fredric Jameson. Selfe summarizes Jameson's observations that the fragmentation propagated by computer networks, with their insistent reminder that there are ever more selves and ideas "out there," may actually prevent individuals or groups from "acting effectively with a sense of personal agency" (284)—as happened to some small extent

with the WPA-L list that I characterized above. The boundless expanse of the Internet, fueled by an additive logic that directly confronts the individual writer with how much there is and is to come, has a paradoxically paralytic effect. In the face of such verdant complexity, writers may, I fear, be cornered into ever-smaller—though admittedly more frequent—forays into the network, developing an online consciousness that offers no psychic or political resting places. The essay offers such places, though they are hard to win and never permanent. Essays remain places with rhetorical power, as readers are consoled by writers who can organize corners of chaos, not just by gathering, arranging, and exchanging but by venturing to say what a part might mean. It's ultimately debilitating to ignore the variety of genres that constitute network discourse, to imagine that all texts are like emails, for example, and all emails alike, debilitating to prize linkage over that which is linked. Essays and patches of the essayistic can and should populate the Internet, like raisins in the cake of the expanding electronic universe, to recall my favorite seventh grade cosmological figure. Essays resist the entropic forces of discourse, perhaps naively and perhaps to conservative ends. Perhaps in some near future we will stop worrying and love the entropic, and essays will be historically interesting texts that we thought we once needed but found we can do better without. But for now and until then, for reasons rhetorical, intellectual, political, and psychological, we ought to save a place for essayistic literacy, in our writing and our teaching.