

# CRITICAL EXPRESSIVISM'S ALCHEMICAL CHALLENGE

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## THE PERSONAL-TO-PROFESSIONAL LADDER

From the beginning one of the messages I got (as far as teaching first-year writing was concerned) was that pretty much one begins by “teaching the personal,” moves as soon as possible to the “analytical,” then closes with the “argumentative.” There might be other stops en route—“expository” and “persuasive” and the like could all get slipped in between the bookends. But the trajectory was clear: initially “allow” students to dip into their lives and experiences, with the goal of eventually moving away from all that “personal stuff” into realms more explicitly “academic,” “rigorous,” “scholarly.” Hook the initiates, in other words, by first “letting them” write about their lives and interests, the stuff that floats their boats. Once we’ve whetted their appetite though, shift gears. “Personal expression” gets left behind as analysis of other people’s texts takes center stage. “Dissection” and “critique” and “debate” move in where the personal has been evicted, or at least rendered secondary or subservient to the examination of artifacts, the elucidation of ideas located beyond the writer’s local experience. One might picture the progression like some kind of game board—each student entering via their own unique paths and histories, engaging with them along the way, but ultimately everyone coming closer and closer to a common finish line where it’s not their “expressed” personal histories that matter but, say, the way they marshal evidence, cite sources, make inferences, assemble claims. Establish authority. Enter into other people’s conversations.

Occasionally this “personal-to-professional” path was made quite explicit. In one place where I used to teach, a senior colleague and supervisor laughed disparagingly of how our freshmen were “so in love with their little stories” and needed to be “broken” of such self-indulgences. This was in marked contrast to the fairly progressive graduate program I was in during the late 1980s where considerable attention was placed on designing learning environments where students had the freedom to explore writing on their own terms. And yet even there, once we grad students got to our comps and the dissertation, the notion of incorporating or validating the “personal”—however much that concept had been valued in our conversations about students’ rights to their own languages—was regarded

as risky and problematic. We were after all training ourselves to enter the profession; to not take seriously the genre conventions of the cover letter, dissertation prospectus, the manuscript, the job interview, would have been self-defeating.

I suppose what bothers me most of all is how seductive this one-directional ladder is. I know because I'm no stranger to it. I have in fact embraced it in the past and at times uncritically enforced it. I used to recommend it to faculty looking for suggestions on how to introduce writing at different stages of the semester. And this supposed progression—it really can be such a seductive little formula, no? I mean, there is a comfortable logic to it. Those early-in-the-semester “personal essays” can be such excellent icebreakers. Everyone gets to find out a tiny bit about each other, tell some “personal” stories. Students find it little easier to open up in their small group discussions, maybe even locate common ground. Then about a quarter into the semester the focus can turn to texts written by real, published writers, the classroom vocabulary turning to matters of “close reading” and “textual analysis” and “unpacking the text.” Then, after they graduate from this phase, students are channeled into the even loftier realms of argumentation, and new vocabularies are adopted about “claims,” “defining terms,” “evidence,” “anticipating counter-arguments.”

It's not that any of the attendant topics or conversations that take place in this linear continuum is inherently problematic. What's bothersome is the underlying assumption that one inevitably goes in through the Expression door, exits out the Critical door, and that these realms have to occupy rigid, separate geographies.

Of course what I've articulated here is a crude cartoon. I don't personally know anyone who teaches a writing course exactly this way, slavishly marching through these realms in such predictable, lockstep manner. But I feel confident that this trajectory remains alive and well and largely implicit in varying degrees throughout writing curricula and textbooks. (If I'm wrong, we would probably see just as many courses demonstrating the inverse: students beginning with research papers, constructing arguments, analyzing texts, then wrapping up with “personal narratives.”)

I also realize that the terms and binaries I'm invoking here—personal/expressive vs. academic/critical—aren't givens. Some in this volume, like Peter Elbow in his opening chapter, challenge the terminology altogether. Still, for me, these terms retain some cash value. Ultimately I don't find either word meaningless or inherently pejorative; instead I want to bear in mind these are working fictions that point to distinct histories and perceptions, not intractable discourse conventions, and that it's in their juxtaposition, their melding, where we find exciting opportunities for imagining writing.

I'm interested in how either end of the spectrum puts pressure on its alleged antithesis, pushing and pulling us to a more hybrid middle arena where “critical”

embodies the “personal,” and “expressive” eats the “academic”—to a point where the paired construction no longer reinforces either endpoint but actually calls them into question. A binary issuing a challenge for us to recognize the limitation of the very presupposed obligatory continuum. Ultimately this both/and construction—or more accurately, reflective process—calls to mind (for me anyway) the alchemical pairing of opposites referred to as the *coniunctio*, a reasonable metaphor, perhaps, to bear in mind as we explore the possible benefits of conjoining these two modes of inquiry.

## FROM MOTHER'S MILK TO SPEED

Before unraveling that further let me take a detour into etymological terrain. There's a richness of meaning in the root “express” that is absent in the manner in which the word is commonly invoked in our field. For while “expressive” in our compositional history has often been linked with, say, “personal,” “emotional,” and “uncritical,” a quick tour through the word's history points to some interesting variations. An incomplete list, courtesy of the OED:

One of the earliest meanings of “express” is “to press out,” specifically to press or squeeze out milk from the breast. An organic, feminine connotation—although express here also means being forced out by mechanical means.

“Express” also means “to portray, represent,” linking it with rendering—and so in this way “expressive discourse” could, one might think, have something in common with the detailed description associated with, say, more clinical, scientific observations.

The term “beyond expression” is intriguing for it implies that “expression” is the endpoint, a culmination—as there can be no expression beyond expression. Expression thus as the final realm, a pinnacle of—well, expression.

“Expressionless” of course means “destitute of expression; giving no indication of character, feeling, etc.; inexpressive.” It means “expressing nothing, conveying no meaning.” Here expression is thus saturated with meaning, the source and conveyor of meaning—whereas expressionless equals absence. No meaning, in other words, without expression.

Expression is elsewhere defined as “to represent in language; to put into words, set forth (a meaning, thought, state of

things); to give utterance to (an intention, a feeling).” Not only is expression thus meaning saturated, but is here the very creation of meaning—meaning conjured within language. And when it’s summarized as “To put one’s thoughts into words; to utter what one thinks; to state one’s opinion,” it comes very close to argumentation, the articulation of a position.

If the earliest roots of “express” carry vestiges of the feminine and maternal, embedded within the term are conventionally masculine connotations as well. For express also means speed, no dillydallying, no time to stop unnecessarily along the way. No pausing for reflection. Hence we have the express train, express delivery, express highway, express messenger, and even the express rifle.

It seems some in our field have chosen to define “expression” and “expressivist” and “expressionist” pretty narrowly. In composition such words have too often been indicators of naive exuberance, narcissism, lack of self-reflection.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, we have been much savvier about the term “critical.” While the OED tells us that “criticism” certainly means “the action of criticizing, or passing judgment upon the qualities or merits of anything; esp. the passing of unfavourable judgment; fault-finding, censure,” we’re quick to make clear to our students that it is not that kind of criticism we’re all about in the academy but rather critique as measured, thoughtful, transparent, honest introspection in the search for truth. Or something like that.

Why has our field been more willing to acknowledge the multiple meanings in the definitional aura surrounding “critical,” and not so much “expressive”? What is it about the “personal” that makes the academic so nervous?

## **OUR (NOT SO CRITICALLY) EXPRESSIVE ACADEMIC DISCOURSE**

Which brings me to my second short detour in which I feel compelled to highlight a contradiction we all know but which I don’t think gets acknowledged nearly enough: that, despite our professional tendency to reject the “personal” in favor of “objectivity,” academia, as a culture and a workplace, is as fraught with as much raw, personal, messy personal emotion as any professional community you can probably think of.

As academics we do an incredible job at portraying ourselves as dispassionate scholars privileging neutral objectivity and reasoned discourse and impartial rigor. More often than not we value the quantitative over the qualitative, “empirical data” over storytelling, measured debate over in-your-face finger pointing. But

let's be honest: we are no strangers to the most personal of the personal—as any Human Resources office, dean, general counsel, chair, and most faculty, adjuncts, and grad assistants can tell you. For while in our peer-reviewed journals we might (might) bend over backwards to effect a posture of measured balance—infusing our prose with obligatory phrases like “I would like to suggest” and “an alternative reading might” and “perhaps we ought to consider,” we are also people who are no slouches at throwing tantrums in department meetings, dissing colleagues, distributing ad hominem attacks in mailboxes, making students cry in the classroom, making our colleagues cry, crying ourselves in our offices, writing snotty emails, and sparring with colleagues in all manner of venues. Nor are we strangers to favoritism, paranoia masked as overconfidence, jealous petty exchanges, insults, one-upmanship, and character assassination. (It's why, when academics read a novel like Richard Russo's *Straight Man*, they know immediately a text like that has to be grounded in reality.)

I'm not saying the “personal” or “expressive” are synonymous only with these touchier emotions. Obviously much of our “expressive” discourse is also what we would consider laudatory, necessary, and worth celebrating—we are after all a breed of professionals who value academic freedom, speaking truth to power, and pursuing things like “truth” even when it disrupts various status quos. My point is that such more emotionally problematic “expressive,” “personal” iterations are alive and well in our academy, always have been, and that a more accurate and comprehensive assessment of “academic discourse” would have to include this richer, messier pool of discourse. To pretend that the discourses of academic culture aren't in a great many ways inherently “expressive” just isn't true.

## AN ALCHEMICAL INVITATION

For me the challenge and appeal of “critical expressivism” is in its both/and implications. Alchemically, the *coniunctio* refers to the wedding of opposites, the bringing together of unlike materials or states of being in order to construct some alternate hybrid form or perception that, synergistically, depends upon yet is distinct from its components. For me the bridging of the “critical” and “expressive” domains ultimately leads us to a reflective process where, Uroboros-like, we continually cycle through both opposites to a point where the binary might be left behind and some other, more interesting, complex, queered understanding of introspection, and how it might be imaginatively conveyed, begins to surface. These conjoined twins push us to continually problematize and question our own positionality as we write—moving us to ask such questions as:

What's my own personal, private investment in this? (and if there isn't one, then, why exactly am I engaged in this writing act?) What does this writing task hold for me, personally, and how and why might I acknowledge (or conceal) the degree of that personal investment? Am I sufficiently subjecting my predilections to healthy skepticism, processing them through a critical filter, unwilling to leave anything to assumption? How far am I willing to critique my own ideas, and in the process regard my lived histories that have made them part of who I am? If the discursive arenas I seek to enter and participate within frown upon rhetorical markers others might characterize as too "personal," or likewise too "academic," how far am I willing to go to challenge the expectations of those audiences? When do I acquiesce? How might my concept of "the personal" evolve into something that resembles nothing like all the forms and genres typically, maybe pejoratively associated with that word? And same for "critical," the "academic?" Most of all, how to write, and think through writing in ways that move outside both ends of this spectrum, that don't reject either the "expressive" or the "critical," but engage in a means of trying to make writing within (or outside—?) an arena where personal/academic, critical/expressive begin to drop their meanings, and no longer make all that much sense anyway?

What I like about the concept of the "critically expressive" is how it queers the binary, challenging each half by forcing them into the other's arms. Comparable pairings (although, here, flipped) might be "personally academic," "locally global," "emotionally objective." It's interesting too that in such pairings one of these inverted twins is always the suspect term demanding validation, whereas its partner is typically assumed to be more appropriate. "Expressive," "personal," "local," "emotional"—traditionally, in academic contexts anyway, such gestures have to be justified, excused, permitted. Allowances made. We feel we have to make good arguments for letting them through the door. On the other hand "critical," "academic," "global," "objective"—these are assumed to be self-evident. Ultimately though it's not condemning one side over the other, or even reversing this imbalance, but the invitation to create some wholly distinct third space through writing that I find appealing. An invitation leading, perhaps, to an understanding of writing as, say, art.

So how might this manifest in the classroom? When we find ourselves composing, verbally or in writing, "in the personal"—that is, self-consciously invoking

the autobiographical or the local or the personal or even the “emotional”—we might push ourselves and our students to consider never settling for “just” telling the story, venting, confessing, sharing. Not that there’s anything wrong with “just” doing any of that. But if the critically expressive is one of our interests, we’ve an opportunity before us to question the stories we would otherwise “just” tell (the classroom as a conversational, compositional realm distinct from, say, the dinner table or bar). It’s a space where we can expect ourselves to keep asking: so why that story? Why convey this personal account? What’s the motive behind this desire to share these emotions? What might be some of the as of yet unrealized stories percolating beneath this autobiographical rendering? In other words, not to simply be satisfied with the presentation of story for story’s sake, but provoked to keep cracking story open, unraveling and unpacking it.

On the flip side, when we find ourselves operating “in the academic”—that is, attentive to all that critical stuff like evidence, analysis, arguments, and the rest of it—we might seek to be more unabashedly up front about the personal, and maybe even private, motivations and concerns behind the ideas and decisions that grow out of this work. Here, the focus could also be on storytelling, but the stories behind our professional and research needs.

Many of us in composition studies do something like this already. Most of our journals are filled with articles where authors make no apologies for introducing their own autobiographical, “personal” accounts and motives. Still, I’m interested in what happens when we push ourselves further to the point where considering the personal as critical, and the critical as personal, becomes risky, startling, and maybe uncomfortable.

I did this recently in a book I wrote where I struggled to tell a variety of stories and pull together a bunch of research. The process was for me more painful, awkward, invigorating, and ultimately revealing than any other writing project I’ve undertaken. The book had its genesis in these so-called “recovered memories” my mother started to have in her early fifties—accounts of rather sensational abuse at the hands of grandmother. I wanted to tell these stories, which my mother passed along to me, but needed to present that telling within the context of something larger than “just” her childhood story. And so I found myself researching the history of the region in which she grew up—a weird section of central New York State. This historical mining unexpectedly led me back to the “personal” as I turned up accounts of long lost relatives on my mother’s side (including, I discovered, the leader of a religious cult back in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century).

After a while I realized, somewhat reluctantly, that I would also have to introduce some of my own childhood memories and photos in this narrative as a means of contrasting the horrorshow my mom experienced with the more

idyllic childhood my mother, and father too, constructed for me and my sister. This was exceptionally hard for me. To shine a light on myself that way and be so revealing to an outside audience made me incredibly nervous. I was much more comfortable letting the focus be on my mother, dead relatives, and regional histories. As a result I learned that, while the “personal” and “expressive” are often assumed to be problematic in that they invite undisciplined, narcissistic navel-gazing, in truth a rendering of the intimate, the guarded, the innermost, can require no small degree of difficult reflection and self-critique in figuring out how to communicate all that to an invisible, imagined public audience. Being “expressive,” in this sense, for me, turned out to be way harder and weirder than any of the academic writing I ever did. Developing that kind of confidence in one’s work, one’s audience—it’s just scary.

As I worked through this business of bridging other people’s stories with my own, the focus of this book took on new significance. I became interested in the strangeness of memory and the slipperiness of identity. In doing research into accounts of child abuse as well as controversies surrounding concepts like recovered memory, I found myself realizing I had to rethink concepts like “childhood” and “trauma” from scratch. On top of all this I wanted to introduce as much photographic and visual “narrative” as possible—old photos and postcards—while messing around with the visual arrangement of text on the page in ways that might (if only to me) indiscreetly reflect some of the ideas housed within.

In the end it turned out to be the most difficult thing I’ve written and will likely ever publish. More than anything else I’ve tackled in writing, this manuscript represented more fully a sustained engagement with the merging of these two endpoints—the critical, and the expressive. Working within this hybrid, liminal realm now seems to me more challenging than self-consciously choosing to reside within either side. A both/and embrace that seems fraught with difficulties, but also unexpected surprises.

I make mention of my manuscript not because it’s how I’m pushing others to write. I mention it because it’s an example of what this whole critical/expressive *coniunctio* (or whatever metaphor you prefer) might point to. Ultimately I’m interested in classroom environments, and master’s theses, and dissertations, and published articles, where authors (and the faculty, directors, supervisors, editors, and readers who say yea or nay to the worthiness of such work, validating them or not) grant themselves permission to dive into and beyond notions of both “expressive” and “critical,” “personal” and “academic,” to a point where the writing manifests messily, curiously. “Of its own accord.” I’ve come to realize that I privilege discovery, even when it surfaces in odd and uncomfortable ways. Experimentation borne out of need and desire, not necessarily fashion or convention or tradition. Right now “critical expressivism” seems to me about as



exciting a new concept as any surfacing within our field, opening up strange and startling new landscapes for composing.

## NOTES

1. And when I say “we” I include myself. Because—and here is my essay’s little *mea culpa* moment—I was often one of those who was too quick to assign pejorative connotations to “expressive” discourse. For the longest time I associated the word with sloppy exuberance, or loud relatives, or the constant barrage of egos run amuck on television and radio. Of course, my resistance to the “expressive” had more to do with my own discomfort with conveying the autobiographical—something touched on in this essay. So I failed to draw a distinction between the kind of obligatory, scripted expressionism one finds in, say, reality television and bad memoir writing and extroverted uncles, with the legitimately self-preoccupied explorations of first-year writers who have every reason to be fascinated with their lives, histories, minds, and emotions. Thanks, by the way, to the editors of this collection for providing me with an opportunity to figure this out.