

Art and Anger—Upon Taking up the Pen Again: On Self(e)-Expression

G. Douglas Atkins

True art, when it happens to us, challenges the “I” that we are.
—Jeanette Winterson

Whatever turmoil the poet may be in, his job is not to infect us
with his turmoil.
—Hugh Kenner

My heart respects conventional rules
and laws of composition.
I recall the great works of old masters
and see how my contemporaries have failed.
—Lu Ji

In her quirkily titled response to my essay “On Writing Well; Or, Springing the Genie from the Inkpot: A Not-So-Modest Proposal,” Cynthia Selfe inadvertently poses the problem of art and anger. She does this in at least two ways: first, in both the tone of her response and the burden of reply to it that she places on me; and, second, in the general nature of her iconoclastic mode.¹ Neither one of us reaches the level of art, of course, though I suspect that she imagines herself aspiring toward it as much as I fear that my *essai* “chunks like a dusty earthen bowl / and I’m shamed by the song of musical jade” (Ji).

In her hastily but in places well-written response, “To His Nibs, G. Douglas Atkins—Just in Case You’re Serious About Your Not-So-Modest Proposal,” Professor Selfe responds angrily, opening with a shocking sentence that sets the tone for the piece—a piece full of phrases that I find uncivil, offensive, and unquotable. She ends with some perhaps equally surprising warm words justifying, or attempting to, her tirade on the basis that she never intended to savage me, only my proposal. *You* may be able to make the distinction, but I certainly feel the sting, or rather the force of the pounding, not just in the injudicious phrasing but, perhaps most, in this condemnation: although “you give good words,” “the heart of your words is small and it brings darkness.” I can be grateful for at least the opportunity to respond on that score.²

Over time I have skirmished enough, I reckon, in such places as *College English*, *PMLA*, and *The Scriblerian*, but never before have I encountered such vituperation, replete with name-calling, as disfigures Selfe’s piece. As I struggle with how to respond here, I recall an earlier set-to with the scholar James A. Winn over the role of theory in eighteenth-century studies. I then took the side of the Moderns (or, rather, post-Moderns) in this battle of the books. I also took the high road, invoking René Girard’s notions of “reciprocal violence” and opting to try not to win(n). I attempt the same here, where I find myself, given the recent turn of theory, aligned again with the Ancients. It is, in any case, necessary to recognize the stakes as we engage in the perennial struggle (or warfare).

So while I decline to be pacifist, I seek not to respond in kind or to repeat Selfe’s anger, which would ensure neither amity nor dialogue but further violence, indeed marking my words as small. Whether I succeed remains to be seen, for Selfe delivers frequent and vicious blows to head and heart. The temptation to fire away, at will, is great. But it helps, I find, to recall Jane Tompkins’ “Fighting Words,” an essay that reinforces points made years earlier by Keith Fort. Employing the image of the shoot-out at the OK Corral, Tompkins shows how the liquid or juice we spill in scholarly and critical warfare is as much blood as ink:

Violence takes place in the conference rooms at scholarly meetings and in the pages of professional journals; and although it’s not the same thing to savage a person’s book as it is to kill them with a machine gun, I suspect that the nature of the feelings that motivate both acts is qualitatively the same. This bloodless kind of violence that takes place in our profession is not committed by other people; it’s practiced at some time or other by virtually everyone. *Have gun, will travel* is just as fitting a theme for academic achievers as it was for Paladin. (589)

The issue here, in these pages of *JAC*, really isn’t my heart, for mine is only a flesh wound. It’s much larger: a battle of the books that I dare not fail to join.

When anger begets art, the familiar if not characteristic form is satire, where (as in Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” say) the fictive situation channels the ire or (say, in Pope’s *Dunciad*) the fact of versification, alongside capacious allusiveness, restrains, controls, and transmutes. If the butt of satirical anger be not (represented as) an ogre, trouble brews (see Daniel Defoe, and Dryden’s “MacFlecknoe”). If anger be not good, passion is. Writing that lacks anger can be art, but writing that lacks

passion is often scholarship and appears as the essay's opposite, what William H. Gass calls "that awful object, 'the article'" (25). Cynthia Selfe is passionate as well as angry, but her passion stems mainly from anger and so suffers from being of the negative kind, directed *against* (an)other. Healthy passion is directed *toward* the essay, for instance, and the pen. Certainly, the pen inspires passion; many have written of pen passion, and an important book is titled *A Passion for Pens*. I wonder how many have expressed a *passion* for their computer, let alone have been able to *love* it.

As I was preparing this reply, I was reading Jeanette Winterson's intriguing *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, from which I have drawn for an epigraph. If Winterson seems iconoclastic in some ways, she is quite familiar in others, expressing, for example, her deep respect and fondness for that classicist, royalist, and Anglican T.S. Eliot, whose *Four Quartets*, she declares, means more to her than any other twentieth-century poem ("I know it by heart"). Passionate about collecting first editions—she owns the individual pamphlets of *Four Quartets* as they were issued over the years as well as the collected edition signed by Eliot—Winterson says this, her point being applicable as well to pens: "They do need to be handled. The pleasure in a book is, or should be, sensuous as well as aesthetic, visceral as well as intellectual" (123). What she says elsewhere in her book is also applicable to the situation at hand—for instance, this:

I like to live slowly. Modern life is too fast for me. That may be because I was brought up without the go-faster gadgets of science, and now that I can afford them, see no virtues in filling the day with car rides, plane rides, mobile phones, computer communication.

If you deal in real things, those things have a pace of their own that haste cannot impose upon. The garden I cultivate, the vegetables I grow, the wood I have to chop, the coal I have to fetch, the way I cook, (casseroles), the way I shop, (little and often), the time it takes to read a book, to listen to music, the time it takes to write a book, none of those things can happen in microwave moments. I am told that the values I hold and the way I live are anachronisms paid for by privilege. It is a privilege to make books that people want to read but why would it be more appropriate, less anachronistic, for me to spend the money I earn on a flashy lifestyle instead of funding my own peace and quiet? (158-59)

I don't know whether she writes with a pen, but that instrument would be consonant with a life lived in relation to "real things, those things [that] have

a pace of their own that haste cannot impose upon" (158). Winterson's fondness for signed first editions resonates with the passion for pens I share with writers and collectors: she says that signed first editions "offer a presence not found in any old book and never found in paperbacks" (130). What she feels is "psychometry": "the occult power of divining the properties of things by mere contact" (130). I *know* whereof she speaks.

A careful and balanced reader as well as writer, Winterson goes on to some remarkably apposite observations on feeling, self(e), and art. The occasion is Eliot's famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," itself an apt exemplum for my argument here. As Winterson notes, reading Eliot as well as anyone I know (this side of Hugh Kenner), the author of "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* was "an emotional poet" and "did not intend that his cry against autobiography would be used as a theory of aridity." He was, she says rightly, "an enemy of sentimentality and easy solutions" (184). When he wrote in another essay, "The Metaphysical Poets," that "poets in our civilisation, as it exists at present, must be difficult," he did not mean, argues Winterson (whose asseverations apply directly to Selfe), that

poets should be sterile or wilfully obscure. It is clear from the essay that his admiration for the Metaphysicals is admiration of a sensibility that could absorb awkward "unpoetic" material and render it through fresh images into emotional experience. To do that demands a concentration *away* from Self, an impersonality that allows other realities to find a voice that is more than reported speech. And it means that the poet's preoccupations do not necessarily become the preoccupations of the poem. The space that art creates is space outside of a relentless self, a meditation that gives both release and energy. (185)

As I read the situation, Virginia Woolf points to the same issue in her "feminist manifesto" *A Room of One's Own*. There, as she seeks to identify the "incandescence" and the integrity characteristic of the great literary work, Woolf incarnates the thoughtfulness Matthew Arnold had famously lauded as "disinterestedness." Reading and teaching Woolf's essay (*her own* term for the six chapters that constitute this generous and capacious little book), I imagine her as like Edmund Burke, effecting "that return . . . upon himself" that seemed to Arnold "one of the finest things in English literature" (140, 139): "what I call living by ideas," which he then defines as the capacity—"when one side of a question has long had your earnest support, when all your feelings are engaged, when you hear all round you no language but one, when your party talks this language

like a steam engine and can imagine no other—still to be able to think, still to be irresistibly carried, if so it be, by the current of thought to the opposite side of the question” (140). As to *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf warns precisely of the dangers of self(e)-expression, which can all too easily run amok—in the words of Swift, the fancy getting “astride on the reason.” Self-expression bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction; they fairly reek of indulgence.

According to Woolf, in 1929, “the impulse towards autobiography” perhaps being “spent,” the contemporary writer “may be beginning to use writing as an art, not as a method of self-expression” (79-80). Earlier, however, a problem existed—a problem that compromised art and debilitated the woman writer, whom Woolf represents with unalloyed sympathy. As an example of the problem, she points to the “flaw in the centre” of Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* (74). That flaw appears, she demonstrates (one is tempted to say that Woolf here is practicing deconstruction without a license) as an awkward and eventful moment in chapter twelve, the point at which the narrator suddenly becomes defensive and Brontë turns commentator and polemicist, sacrificing art on the altar of personal anger:

The continuity is disturbed. One might say, I continued, laying the book down beside *Pride and Prejudice*, that the woman who wrote those pages had more genius in her than Jane Austen; but if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot.

(69-70)

And so Brontë lashes out, in contrast to Woolf who, like Winterson, writes calmly, wisely, and “of her characters,” her control and poise apparent even in the craft of her sentences here. It is thus, writes Woolf a bit later, that “anger was tampering with the integrity of Charlotte Brontë the novelist. She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance” (73).

Although tempted, I will not speculate on any personal problem, apart from the obvious anger, that prevails in the Selfe-expression—a Freudian might have a field day! The lack of control spilling out into the opening sentence deteriorates soon into gratuitous name-calling. But, of course, the greatest indulgence appears in Selfe’s embrace of, shall I say, *free*

prose. If free verse irritated Robert Frost (it’s like playing tennis without a net, he famously opined), this *satura* strikes me as disingenuous. Feminists have long, of course, eschewed Woolf’s warning and engaged in sometimes wild experiments with prose, now and then with stunning results. In *Estranging the Familiar: Toward a Revitalized Critical Writing*, I applauded feminist efforts to effect a truly personal and often autobiographical literary criticism, but I also found wanting the form and mode of many of those efforts, including the work of Rachel Blau duPlessis, author of the well-known “For the Etruscans,” included in *The Pink Guitar*. In her response to my essay, Selfe imitates Carole Maso’s more successful prose poem (I suppose that’s what it is), “Rupture, Verge, and Precipice: Precipice, Verge, and Hurt Not.” Anger striates Maso’s piece as well, but there’s no attack on any one individual; rather, the attack is on all of us Luddites (unfortunately, even Maso shows a regrettable though familiar misunderstanding of essays, lumping them together with themes, papers, and “that awful object, ‘the article,’ the essay’s opposite,” evidently believing that an essay should “have a hypothesis, a conclusion, should argue points” [52]).

What I object to is not experimentation per se (compare Maso’s works with *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*) but indulgence, although experimentation with genre succeeds only when one is thoroughly familiar with, and sufficiently skilled at, the form being pushed to its boundaries. A notoriously protean form (it may even be a-generic, or so allowed the great experimental essayist Roland Barthes), the essay not only accommodates but thrives on change, capacious enough to treat almost any subject in a broad range of styles. Its survival may be traced to this very ability to accommodate developing sensibility. The essay, whose passing Joseph Wood Krutch famously lamented in 1951 (really a turn-of-the-century instance of belles-lettres) is hardly visible nowadays, whereas contemporary writers like Nancy Mairs, Gretel Ehrlich, and Bernard Cooper flash brilliantly their own distinctive ways of making the essay new—and that is to say nothing of writers either like Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, and Theodor Adorno who make of critical commentary “intellectual poetry” or of those writers working, often successfully, at the boundary of the essay and especially the short story.

In her anger Selfe fails to attend to my words, whether little or not, and so misses the heart of my message. Some of what I say is outrageous, and deliberately so, a point suggested in my titular allusion to Jonathan Swift’s well-known satire “A Modest Proposal,” which foregrounds a fictional speaker who advocates, as a way to relieve certain Irish problems, the

eating of young children. So uptight is the Selfe we find on display in these pages that she reaches the preposterous conclusion that it's somehow necessarily wrong to ask a secretary to type my writing, and that I shouldn't "muster the hubris required to make students write with their own personal favorite technology." If I understand her correctly, Selfe is saying, among other things, that I, this politically incorrect Luddite "G. Doug," require that my students write with fountain pens, indeed expensive ones (the values of which she often gets wrong). Where she got this last notion I have no idea. In fact, I have never asked students, nor would I ever, to write in ink with a pen—good or no, fountain or ballpoint, rollerball or felt-tip. I sometimes invite individuals to try out some of my pens, which only a few decide to do, many of them unsure even how to hold one. Furthermore, I *recommend* that essays done at home be typed.

What we thus find in Professor Selfe's response is not just anger spilling over and inciting carelessness and error but also the narrowness of which she (falsely) accuses me. It's the all-too-familiar story, inside academia and out, of a wolf in sheep's clothing, the Devil in the self(e), the *soi-disant* oppressed taking on the filthy mantle of the alleged oppressor: new presbyter but old priest writ large, a realization from England's distant religious and political warfare that Derrida would appreciate as the failure to pursue the work of deconstruction whereby mere overturning results only in the imposition of another domination—following considerable bloodshed. Although she professes pluralism and multiplicity—the popular "diversity"—the claim rings false, for Selfe rejects the familiar essay and the pen outright even as she projects intolerance upon me. I don't see in her response much openness, only embrace of the new and the technological—no both/and, only another tired either/or. But, of course, the ways of the self(e) are wily and treacherous, determined and committed ultimately to its own interested ways.

When Montaigne, the generally acknowledged father of the essay, declared that "To compose our character is our duty" (III, 13), he may have had three distinct but related notions in mind. No doubt he was referring, first, to the *making*, the formation; but Montaigne, that wily old Gascon, may also have had in mind something more: possibly that, as Emerson later suggested, we can write our character, perhaps bring character into being by means of, in, and through the writing. Even a third sense of "composition" may lurk within Montaigne's phrasing. In my study, separated for an all-too-brief term from the busy world of the noisy boulevard just beyond my front door, looking out back onto a greensward,

alone, with my pen, writing, I feel I am becoming *composed*—that is, regaining some composure and balance in my life. May Sarton said it well in her *Journal of a Solitude*: "I am here alone for the first time in weeks, to take up my 'real' life again at last. That is what is strange—that friends, even passionate love, are not my real life unless there is time alone in which to explore and to discover what is happening or has happened" (11). Such time, such exploration and discovery, can come, for me at least, when an easy, quiet pen enhances, perhaps enforces, certainly ensures composure. A typewriter or computer would click and rattle and disturb; worse, the computer would shatter the serenity with flashes of light as well as the clack of plastic. Agitation is the opposite of composure, which equates with quiet, equanimity, tranquillity, and serenity. With my pen, I compose—if not my character, at least words and self. Writing with my Montegrappa Historia, Aurora Solé, or Dunhill relaxes and settles me, allowing me to focus on things that matter, on what is not and should not be erasable or eclipsed. The permanency the pen inscribes beckons me quickly and easily into what that green world that lies just outside my study window presages; I establish, and for a while maintain, relation with my best self.

At any rate, to be successful, a writer must *slow down*. Anger militates against thoughtfulness and induces haste and, its confrere, lack of care. Control—self-control—is simply essential. More and more in my teaching of essay writing—at all levels, first-year to graduate—I preach the necessity of slowing down so that related events and experiences have time to accumulate meaning. *You* have to slow down, respect time, take a line out for a walk or a saunter; it's no wonder that essayists—from Hazlitt, Thoreau, and Beerbohm to Hoagland and Alfred Kazin—write frequently and lovingly about walking. In a hurry, a writer fails to explore, to give the mind time and space to reflect, savor a thought, extend and pursue it, follow its mazy and unpredictable paths. The glory of essaying is that you never know where a thought will lead you. Essaying draws out, *educes*—and that is, I guess, what education is all about.

And here reenters the pen, for which I rather suspect Selfe feels a twinge of envy. Just this morning the local newspaper carried on its front page an Associated Press story reporting that "experts" worry about people communicating via computer: they are becoming "increasingly informal—and sloppy." The story goes on to report that e-mail is "routinely strewn with typos, grammatical errors and various shortcuts, such as no capital letters" ("E-Mail"). As I understand it, the computer

increases the speed of communication, evidently breeding haste, tossing notions of control to the winds. Obviously, not all computer-users bask in such indulgence or lose control, just as not all writers with good or even expensive pens make great writing. But whether or not the medium is the message, the instrument with which one writes matters. The effects can be countered, to be sure, by talent or the lack of talent, skill and care or the lack thereof. With the pen you simply cannot write fast; you have to stop occasionally to refill with ink (and, likely, to wash off the smudges, though not with a modern filling system, such as the one my Solé boasts); and you don't want to proceed either pell-mell or helter-skelter—for you, its fortunate and grateful steward, wish to do your best with *and* for your pen, which you feel like honoring. Somehow, you think, it deserves your best, and you respond in kind to *its* beauty and fine workmanship—or at least you try to. Even people like me, whose penmanship, resembling hieroglyphics, is barely legible, seek to write in a good, steady, and even (if not elegant) hand. The pen is a pleasure to write with; if you haven't tried it, don't knock it. There's a tactile pleasure in holding an "easy" pen and an aesthetic pleasure in viewing the ink that has flowed through the ap-pen-dage onto paper and now bears the stamp of individuality in and as words. The lack of uniformity is good, the manuscript more pleasing to the eye than typescript or print.

A sensuous quality inheres in writing with a pen—I say "sensuous" not "sensual," although some writers report that feeling too. The pen—the one I write with here is a Montegrappa Historia, Limited Edition #588, parchment-colored, fine nib (much less expensive, incidentally, than a computer; around the cost, I reckon, of a decent printer)—connects me too with the past. I mean the venerable history of the pen, including its trusty predecessor the quill, my own adolescent use of a fountain pen, those writers past (and present) who took and take up the pen with both pleasure and literary success, and my father the automobile mechanic. He made his living, not an easy one, working with his hands, so skillful that people drove nearly two hundred miles from Atlanta just for him to lay his callused, cracked, and knowing hands on their engines and transmissions. He fixed motors, made cars run smoothly—some said he made cars "purr." And the tools he kept in an old, dirty gray metal box he cherished—as part of him, I reckon. With them he effected near-miracles. Never interested in craft, or in developing skills (which I figured myself above, what with my book-learning and all), I worked with my brain, even as I knew a connection was missing: I was no manual laborer and proud of it. Daddy was too, to a degree. Now that he is gone and I am, past fifty,

a little less impatient and a little more doubtful of the efficacy of gadgets and the newfangled—more like him and less like a Swiftian "projector," a know-it-all dismissive of doing things, in Belloc's words, "just as they should be done and have been for a hundred thousand years"—now I appreciate the little things ("little" only with irony): details, and craft (152). Writing with a good pen—like my Montegrappa, my Aurora Solé, my Dunhill carbon fibre—I connect with my father, working with my hands as I never felt I was doing when I punched keys on a typewriter as a reporter or even when I worked a linotype machine as an apprentice printer. I connect with him, too, because I appreciate and take pride in the instrument with which I work, the two of us, pen and I, a team, completing each other—when I'm lucky, attuned, at-oned.

My new darling, the last of my acquisitions, my Montegrappa, came with a handsome and lavishly illustrated coffee-table book representing the history of the great Italian house that began making pens in 1912. "The privilege of a lifetime" is its slogan. This pen attracts for many reasons, principally its union of old and new, new technology and old materials combined in traditional form: the ergonomic form of the grip section made of .925 silver; the elegant mother-of-pearl veining, part of the pen's "nostalgic" materials (celluloid for the body, Ebonite for the feed), the same as those used in the "Golden Age" of Montegrappa (and other) pens in the 1920s; the Greek fret reintroduced in the decoration of the two-tone eighteen-carat gold nib with platinum masking and continued in the sterling silver band on the cap. Truly, the pen is a both/and: classic and new, practical and artful; it is both working instrument and, if not quite a work of art (like Namiki Maki-e's or Montegrappa's own Aphrodite), a piece of finely executed craft.

And so with this pen, which seems, in its smooth left-to-right flow, to caress the paper, I write to fix my life. "The greatest task of all," declared Montaigne, is "our duty," and that is "to compose our character," "not to compose books, and to win, not battles and provinces, but order and *tranquillity* in our conduct. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately" (III, 13; emphasis added). At any rate, with this pen, with many good pens, as hand and pen work together, the silken movement cannot but please as letters take shape and compose more than words. Sometimes I think I'm making; other times I feel as if I'm fixing something, in emptying the pen that is depleting the self in order for something different and better to appear magically, mystically on the receptive paper. With the pen I write myself out, entire (as Montaigne averred he did), which seems much less likely with a keyboard.

To have a good pen requires no great expense: you can certainly get a good one for less than Selfe leads you to believe, and repairs are rarely necessary. In my classes I sing the praises of the pen but have made few converts. Never, then, do I require the use of a pen, any more than I present the familiar essay as the only form for college writing. The best paper done so far this semester was a spirited defense, by a junior in German, “on an old typewriter.” That class, Advanced Composition, has produced very strong writing—the result, I am convinced, of the requirement that students write personally and about what matters to them while attempting to be artful. In workshops this semester the most consistent theme that has emerged, from me and the students, is the value of slowing down. You can slow down too much, of course, and produce needless detail that only tires and bores. Balance is required here too, just the balance that the essay is made of and the pen exhibits: balancing acts, equanimity, poise.

*University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas*

Notes

1. It will not, I believe, be inappropriate to adduce the autobiographical context in which I received Professor Selfe’s response and in which I pen the following. A Taurus, I have been said (more than once) to possess a bad temper and so to be quick to anger. Whether this be true, and to what degree, I have my own perspective; but whatever the case may be, I was then involved in an imbroglio over the matter and sought help from, among other places, a book called *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology* (Ware). There I found helpful commentary on such topics as “judging others,” “the flowers of anger and the fire of hell,” “it is never worthwhile to lose your temper,” and “extinguishing all feelings of anger.” I chose this book because of a growing interest in religious Orthodoxy, related, of course, to my general embrace of things and positions traditional and stemming from my recent purchase of Krone’s Limited Edition Anno Domini MM, a magnificent pen handpainted in Pelekh, Russia, and thus participating in both the iconographic tradition of the Orthodox Church and that of Russian lacquer miniatures.

2. Also, I have the lucky opportunity to correct an egregious error of my own: in my original epigraph I attributed Pope’s quotation to the Earl of Roscommon. It is, however, a sentence in the Duke of Buckingham’s *Essay on Poetry* rather than Roscommon’s *Essay on Translated Verse*. *Mea culpa*.

Works Cited

- Arnold, Matthew. “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time.” *Matthew Arnold: Selected Prose*. Ed. P.J. Keating. London: Penguin, 1970.
- Atkins, G. Douglas. *Estranging the Familiar: Toward a Revitalized Critical Writing*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1992.
- Belloc, Hilaire. *Hills and the Sea*. 1906. Marlboro, VT: Marlboro, n.d.
- “E-mail Writers Delete Grammar Rules.” *Lawrence (Kansas) Journal-World*. 30 Mar. 2000: 1A.
- Fort, Keith. “The Psychopathology of the Everyday Language of the Profession of Literary Studies.” *College English* 40 (1979): 751-63.
- Gass, William H. “Emerson and the Essay.” *Habitations of the Word: Essays*. New York: Simon, 1985. 9-49.
- Hauray, Pierre, and Jean-Pierre Lacroux. *A Passion for Pens*. Trans. Fred Gorstein. Ridgefield, CT: Greentree, 1993.
- Ji, Lu. “The Well Wrought Urn.” *The Art of Writing: Teachings of the Chinese Masters*. Trans. and Ed. Troy Barnstone and Chou Ping. Boston: Shambhala, 1996. 17-18.
- Kenner, Hugh. *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*. New York: McDowell, 1959.
- Maso, Carole. “Rupture, Verge, and Precipice: Precipice, Verge, and Hurt Not.” *Tolstoy’s Dictaphone: Technology and the Muse*. Ed. Sven Birkerts. St. Paul: Graywolf, 1996. 50-72.
- Montaigne, Michel de. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*. Trans. Donald M. Frame. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1958.
- Sarton, May. *Journal of a Solitude*. New York: Norton, 1973.
- Swift, Jonathan. *The Writings of Jonathan Swift*. Ed. Robert A. Greenberg and William B. Piper. New York: Norton, 1973.
- Tompkins, Jane. “Fighting Words: Unlearning to Write the Critical Essay.” *Georgia Review* 42 (1988): 585-90.

Ware, Timothy, ed. *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*. Comp. by Ighumen Chariton of Valamo. Trans. E. Kadloubovsky and E.M. Palmer. London: Faber, 1966.

Winterson, Jeanette. *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*. New York: Knopf, 1996.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1929. New York: Harcourt, 1989.

Investigating “Whiteness,” Eavesdropping on “Race”

AnaLouise Keating

I feel like I'm being judged for my white skin, but I wasn't involved in the events the author describes. My grandparents immigrated to this country in the early 1900s. Slavery didn't involve us.

I'm not white. What does this analysis of whiteness have to do with me?

Why are we focusing on this race stuff anyway? Why can't we talk about everything we have in common as Americans?

I have heard these and similar comments from students when I teach Gloria Anzaldúa, Frederick Douglass, Leslie Marmon Silko, and a number of other writers who hold up the mirror to “whiteness.”¹ Whether they label themselves “white,” “African American,” “Native American,” “Chicana,” or “American” (which, for my students, does not always imply “white”), many students in my classes attempt to deny the power, privilege, and other implications of “whiteness.” Yet, as Krista Ratcliffe points out in “Eavesdropping as Rhetorical Tactic: History, Whiteness, and Rhetoric,” this denial—because it reinforces an unjust status quo and a resistance to change—is itself a crucial element of “whiteness.” And, no matter how we identify, we all, to greater and lesser degrees, have been trained to think and act in “white” ways. We have internalized what

Anzaldúa describes as a “white” frame of reference. As she explains in an interview² with Andrea Lunsford,

In this country the frame of reference is white, Euro-American . . . [W]e—the colonized, the Chicanos, the blacks, the Natives in this country—have been reared in this frame of reference, in this field. All of our education, all of our ideas come from this frame of reference. We're complicitous because we're in such close proximity and intimacy with the other. Now “us” and “them” are interchangeable. Now there's no such thing as an “other.” The other is in you, the other is in me. This white culture has been internalized in my head. (254)

Ratcliffe makes a similar point in her article. Distinguishing between “white” people and “whiteness,” she asserts, “Like any other socially constructed category (*student, teacher, dean, gender, race, class*) whiteness is a trope, and the actions and attitudes associated with this trope are embodied in all of us (albeit differently) via our socialization” (96). Unlike Ratcliffe and Anzaldúa, however, my students are almost entirely unaware of this “white” framework.

If, as Ratcliffe suggests (and I concur), this “whiteness”—which is not, necessarily, synonymous with “white” people—is associated with an unjust social system and a resistance to change, with the denial of accountability, with closure, with violence, with hypocrisy, and with ignorance of other cultures, then it must be investigated and exposed. Thus, she insists that “in academic and popular discourses, we must investigate whiteness, eavesdropping within history, so that bodies, tropes, and cultures may converge in moments of productive rhetorical usage, moments when personal and social change may be achieved” (102).

I completely agree with Ratcliffe's position and believe that her article makes an important contribution to ongoing explorations of “whiteness,” especially as it affects rhetorical theory. Because “whiteness” has functioned as an oppressive, mythical, invisible norm that ranks people according to racialized ancestry and traits—and negates those (whatever their skin color) who do not conform to its standard—we need to investigate it, exposing its insidious power. But we can't talk about “whiteness” without carefully thinking through the implications and our goals. What do we want to accomplish by investigating “whiteness” in the classroom? What's the next step, once we've exposed “whiteness” to our students? If investigations of “whiteness” are not carried out with great care, educators risk simply reinforcing students' already existing essentialized notions of “race,” as well as the “white” frame of