CHAPTER EIGHT

Reading, Writing, Teaching
Essays as Jazz

THE MAJOR MOTIF: Fascinatin’ Rhythm

Essays are the jazz of literature, fluid and flexible in form. Essays mix rhythms, modes, tones; they break rules, blend genres, blur distinctions between author, subject, and discipline. Because essays speak in conspicuous, personal-sounding styles, they’re engaging to students and to “common readers” and writers alike. But the jazz-like elements that make essays accessible to readers, and worth the risk for writers—their play, freedom, seeming spontaneity, their grounding in the realm of “human evidence” rather than the deconstructive ether (see Anderson, “Hearsay Evidence”)—make them problematic for critics and teachers. These interpreters spend too much time and effort defining and redefining this protean genre and worrying about its status, unless as essayists themselves they experience the genre from the inside out. Understanding the essay as jazz can help teachers and critics, writers, too, to resolve these difficulties. That is the argument of this chapter.

ESSAY FRAGMENT #1: Hello Central, get me Doctor Jazz

I was a professor’s kid, wholesome and highbrow from the get-go. Reared on The New York Times B.C. (before color, and no funnies). And hardcover library books—no trash. No TV—though we could listen to Jack Benny on Sunday nights if we’d done our homework. Sex was a dirty word, like money, whose four-letter alternatives I didn’t learn until I read Chaucer and Henry Miller in grad school, too late to use with insouciance. The family stereo would tolerate only classical records, and George Gershwin, though behind closed doors and late at night my father indulged in his secret vice, playing ragtime on our out-of-tune upright. How comforting it was to fall asleep to the professor’s tinny rhythm, its tinkling counterpoint almost obliterating the night noises of the New Hampshire woods where we lived. Meanwhile I was struggling with the violin, my mother’s cracked hand-me-down whose label identified it, in English, as a “genuine
Stradivarius." For a dozen years I had an uneasy relationship with this abrasive instrument, until in one stroke my college violin teacher broke it off. "You know," he said, "you really should become a writer." He had never read a word I'd written.

Why should he have done so, or indeed, anyone else who didn't have to? For I was learning, only too well, to imitate the models of my egghead professors, writing critical articles in course after course after course. I could turn one out in a week, or overnight if I had to, fifteen pages, plus footnotes and bibliography. Banished were the first person, contractions, and the lush description I'd lingered over in romantic novels—"purple patch," scoffed my mentors. The call of stories yielded to the polysyllabic, polyvalent jargon of academic discourse I had begun to use. Driven underground were the fun and wit and play that had made me fall in love with Dr. Seuss at the age of six—and promptly decide to become a writer. Although in graduate school I had rented a room in the tower of babel, and was filling it up with proper academic furniture, I couldn't bear to move completely out of the house of nonfiction, funky, ramshackle, rambling, full of surprises. I couldn't turn off the jazzy language in my head, raucous, rebellious, sexy, and subversive. So I started writing essays as letters in my mind.

RHYTHM SECTION: It Don't Mean a Thing if it ain't got That Swing
Take five, hot or cool, fast or slow. Improvise. Vary the tempo. Stomp your feet. Clap your hands. Shake, rattle, and roll.

READING ESSAYS: CRITICS AND COMMON READERS: Anything Goes
Until recently, twentieth century highbrow critics have mostly ignored this maverick genre as too lowly, too simple, too amorphous to be treated seriously. Even now, those critics who do focus on essays get stuck on definitions and status and can't seem to get beyond these to look closely at the vast and varied literature that constitutes the essays themselves. Any literary form whose boundaries can't be broached is bound to be treated as marginal.

What indeed do critics mean when they talk about "belletristic prose," "literary nonfiction," or that oxymoron, "creative nonfiction"? Sophisticates who sail through sonnets or sestinas without missing a hemidemisemiquaver feel obliged to identify the common features of this familiar genre that can range from memoir, character sketch, or travel narrative; to natural, cultural or social history or commentary; to popular science writing and reviews. And well they might, for as Hardison notes, essay "plays the same role in literary criticism that the term 'miscellaneous' does in budgeting" (13).
Oh no, not another definition of essay. Oh yes, because I can't get away without one. For a fundamental problem of the commentators lies in their innocent assumption that the term still means what it meant to its parent, Montaigne, in 1580, “a trial, an attempt.” This wily strategist explains his apparently spontaneous mode of composition the way a jazz player might describe improvisation, “I do not correct my first ideas by later ones. . . . I wish to represent the progress of my moods, and that each part shall be seen at its birth.” Montaigne adds, “I have no other drill-master than chance to arrange my writings. As my thoughts present themselves to my mind, I bring them together” (574). I argue below that Montaigne’s seeming casualness is just that, a pose.¹

Equally well-crafted are the many personae of a host of contemporary essayists, including the ostentatiously laid-back E.B. White, the essayist’s essayist. White, after identifying the writer’s ability to “be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter—philosopher, scold, jester, raconteur, confidant, pundit, devil’s advocate, enthusiast,” demotes his metier to second-class citizenship. Those aiming for a Nobel Prize, he says, had better write in high culture modes, novels, poems, plays, “and leave the essayist to ramble about, content with living a free life and enjoying the satisfactions of a somewhat undisciplined existence” (vii). Butrym, among those contemporary critics who treat essays as first rate and first class, wonders, as well he might, whether White’s remark is “to be taken at face value,” or whether “such self-deprecation [is] a convention of the form” (5).

Even William H. Gass, who makes the most perceptive distinctions between the essay and “that awful object, ‘the article,’” diminishes the very genre of which he is a dazzling practitioner² by implicitly restricting his analysis to familiar essays and ignoring the broader category of literary nonfiction. Nevertheless, he is right on target in emphasizing that the essayist is more interested in the process of thinking about a subject than in having the last word, in “exposing this aspect and then that; proposing possibilities, reciting opinions” (25). And he nails down, in fact skewers, the academic article in a jazzy single sentence that could appear only in an essay, but never in an article for reasons that Gass makes apparent:

As an article, it should be striking of course, original of course, important naturally, yet without possessing either grace or charm or elegance, since these qualities will interfere with the impression of seriousness which it wishes to maintain; rather its polish is like that of the scrubbed step; but it must appear complete and straightforward and footnoted and useful and certain and is very likely a veritable Michelin of misdirection; for the article pretends that everything is clear, that its
argument is unassailable, that there are no soggy patches, no illicit inferences, no illegitimate connections; its manners are starched, stuffy, it would wear a dress suit to a barbecue, silk pajamas to the shower; it knows, with respect to every subject and point of view it is ever likely to entertain, what words to use, what form to follow, what authorities to respect; it is the careful product of a professional, and therefore it is written as only writing can be written, even if, at various times, versions have been given a dry dull voice at a conference, because, spoken aloud, it still sounds like writing written down, writing born for its immediate burial in a Journal. (25-26)

The etymological fallacy of identifying essays as tentative, trial works in contrast to articles, assertive and complete, when coupled with the deceptive remarks of practicing essayists writing in the first (and therefore of course sincere) person, are calculated to mislead critics into believing that the essay is both artless and low culture. As true sophisticates know, accessibility and apparent simplicitly, rather than being signs of naivete, may well indicate high rather than low culture, in essays and in jazz alike. In taking it, again and again, from the top, critics can never get to the bottom of the subject.

But these are not the concerns of real readers, those “common readers” respected and loved by Samuel Johnson and Virginia Woolf and by anybody else who writes for readers “uncorrupted by literary prejudices,” rather than for critics (see Woolf 1). For it is the common readers who, like Eudora Welty’s mother, used to “read Dickens in the spirit in which she would have eloped with him” (7), read and love belletristic essays without worrying about their definition or status. Common readers—and let us include ourselves among them—come to essays as they come to jazz, in the expectation that the heart and soul are the best route to the mind.

The biggest problem for common readers is not what to read, for essays abound, but where to find these works in libraries and bookstores. The Library of Congress subject heading, essays, jumbles every sort of nonfiction prose together; Princeton’s on-line catalog, for instance, has 30,000 entries for essay between 1980 and 1988. Butrym notes the vague, eclectic, and consequently unhelpful subject heading, “essay,” that the Library of Congress Subject Headings uses. This mingles “learned treatises of all sorts with the works of classical essay writers such as Montaigne, Lamb, and Bacon,” but omits the works of contemporary belletristic essayists, such as Richard Selzer, Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, Alice Walker, Tillie Olsen, Gretel Ehrlich, and Lewis Thomas, who are catalogued under a variety of diverse genre and key word subject headings (1–2). On the contrary, bookstores honor what Elizabeth Hardwick calls “the condition of
unexpressed hyphenation . . . the autobiographical essay, the travel essay, the political—and so on and so on” (xiii), and disperse bellettristic essays according to key word categories, Biography (which invariably includes Autobiography), Travel, Social Commentary, and so on.

RHYTHM SECTION #2: Free Jazz

STANLEY—HE PLAYS HIS DRUMS, SOMETIMES, AND HE BANGS EM, HE BANGS EM AND HE BANGS EM, HE’LL ROLL EM, BACK AND FORTH AND BACK REAL QUICK WITH A BASE THUMP, AND HE’LL BANG EM AND HIS CYMBALS CRASH AND HISS WHILE HE BANGS EM AND THE BASE THUMPS. And when he does this it’s loud, and the place gets filled, and it feels good, as if you were in your own heart while it was beating.

(Art Greenwood, student)

ESSAY FRAGMENT #2: I’m Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter

Some of my essays start out as letters; in fact, one part of this section was a rehearsal for chapter six, “Teaching College English as a Woman.” I write killer letters in my head, letters so powerful they could change the course of history. Letters so romantic they could break up marriages. Letters so devastating they could win megabuck lawsuits, ruin careers, bring powerful men to their knees—or mine. Letters of such rapier elegance they’d make the receivers envious even as they were dying from the effects of my devastating wit. Letters of such sybaritic splendor and escape that I could be a travel agent for Nirvana Airlines. I rehearse these during the strokes of my daily swim, it’s a lot more interesting than counting laps. I revise when I’m driving, and work them over again when I’m cooking, jotting notes to the necessary rhythm of chopping, grinding, beating, simmering, stewing.

With such power coursing through my mind, I have to be careful. For to send these seductive, subversive words as letters to people I know, with real names and zip codes, might be to alter the course of Western Civilization As We Know It. In the days Before Computer, when I was still writing by hand, I started a few letters in my writer’s notebook, but stopped after realizing that some of my best student writers were trapped in their spirals of notebooks, redundant and narcissistic as Nin. For awhile I confided in my computer, fitful fragments.

But once they hit the screen they didn’t look like letters anymore. For example, one set of three entries, written on June 23, 1990, reads:
"Listen to me. You can't get admitted to graduate school," said my advisor, known for his research on George Eliot. "Why not?" I asked. "I have a 3.87 and this very department just gave me an award for being their top English major. The catalog says you can get in with a 3.5." "What it means," he explained patiently, "is that men can be admitted to the doctoral program with a 3 point. But women need a 4 point. Your grades aren't good enough."

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"Trust me," said the fat obstetrician. "Your baby is ready to be born. I can guarantee that if I induce the baby by 10 a.m on Thursday—in the process of recopying this, I realize that June 23, 1990—the day I wrote this—was twenty-six years to the day that I was lured into this induction—"he will be born by 2." "Like dry cleaning," I thought, "in by 10, out by 2." So I agreed, all the better to accommodate the doctor's schedule, and mine. It would be easier to arrange for a daytime sitter for our two-year-old than to summon a neighbor if this baby should come in the middle of the night. What a good girl I was. And what a fool.

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"Believe me," my mother's advice punctuated my adolescence at intervals. "Never raise your voice to your husband. If you get angry, don't say a word. Your father and I have a perfect marriage; we've never had an argument in all the years we've been married." She reminded me of this when I finally dared to holler at her last week, for the first time in my life. "Why didn't you defend my decision to marry Martin, instead of siding with Pop when he disowned me for marrying a Jew?" "Be quiet!" she snapped. "Mother," I shouted, "you're confusing manners with morality." "Don't raise your voice, young lady. When you're angry you say things you don't mean." "I mean exactly what I say."

WRITING ESSAYS: In The Mood

Now I'll let you in on a secret, though if you yourself are a writer of essays it will come as no surprise. These three paragraphs are not what I wrote on June 23, 1990. Here's the way the original actually read:

Beginning for a feminist consciousness essay:

"Trust me," said the fat obstetrician. "Have your baby on Thursday like a good girl." "You have to obey the rule," said the graduate advisor. "Men can get admitted with a 3 point. Women need a 4 point." "Believe me," said my mother at intervals when I was growing up. "Never argue with your husband. If you get angry, don't say a word." She reminded me of this during an argument last week. "When you're angry you say things you don't mean."

I had every intention of quoting my journal entry verbatim, but as soon as I knew I'd be writing for an audience I had to make some changes.
I couldn't help myself; for the professional writer there are no private writings, even letters and diaries (see chapter twelve, “I Write for Myself and Strangers: Private Diaries as Public Documents”). Personal essayists rewrite and rewrite and rewrite, in the same ways and for the same reasons that novelists do: to tell a good story, to get the sounds and the rhythm right, to supply sufficient detail for an external reader’s understanding, to keep up the momentum, among other things, and especially to get at the essential truth.

Once the germ of an essay hits the paper, or the screen, it becomes simultaneously both more intimate, that is, more revealing, and more detached—that is, more artistically controlled. The raw experience is refined in the telling for the double and very different audiences that Gertrude Stein acknowledged when she said, “I write for myself and strangers.” Such refinement is likewise revealed in the very different styles of very different essayists. Hardison notes that these significant differences emerged even as the genre began. Montaigne’s essays are indeed “associative, discursive, informal, meandering, slovenly,” but the essays of his successor, Bacon, although “inspired by Montaigne’s, are, if anything, anti-Montaignian. Especially in their 1597 form, they are aphoristic, staccato, assertive, hortatory, abrasive” (14–15).

Indeed, the writers’ painstaking process of revision reveals why essays are neither spontaneous nor improvisatory. (Nor is jazz as improvisatory as it appears to the casual listener, as performers and theorists testify (see Packard, Dean). It’s part of the essayist’s skill to make the finished work look more or less jazzy—as if it were effortless, free floating, straight from the heart. Much of the essay’s wit, and impact, lies in this illusion. Just because an essay sounds personal doesn’t mean it is; like the aging Judy Garland, who could cry on cue every time she sang “Over the Rainbow,” writers can adapt their personae to just about any occasion, as our friend E.B. White has told us.

Indeed, the essayist’s techniques are as varied as those of the fiction writer and, in the hands of a master, their literary artistry is as great. Like fiction writers, essayists can present characters, flat or round, in action, in dialogue (even interior monologue), in context, in costume, in scenes interpreted from a myriad of perspectives. They can play with time, with language, with points of view and narrative personae. Even when essay writers make a serious point, and they often do, they’re as likely to argue by indirection—illustration, irony, satire, analogy—as with facts and figures, which themselves seldom appear in straight rows and never in tidy graphs or charts. Here I take issue with Jay Lemke, who in identifying the personal
narrative as "a conventionalized discourse genre," says that "Its conventions concerning viewpoint, appropriate topics, structural organization, and lexical and grammatical preferences are just as restrictive, rigid, and artificial as those of any genre of technical writing." This naive view negates the essay's fluidity and flexibility of form, its wide range of subjects, and ignores as well the creation of personae who might be speaking from perspectives other than the writer's (28, 31).

Scott Russell Sanders has written two essays about his father, "The Inheritance of Tools," and "Under the Influence: Paying the Price of My Father's Booze" that are excellent illustrations of the talented essayist's ability to shape the subject to suit diverse purposes. Together the pair present a composite portrait, presented in a major and a minor key.

Sanders's father strides erect through "Tools" as a meticulous craftsman, loving parent, and patient teacher of the carpenter's many complicated knowledge to his admiring son:

My father would let me lacerate the board until my arm gave out, and then he would wrap his hand around mine and help me finish the cut, showing me how to use my thumb to guide the blade, how to pull back on the saw to keep it from binding, how to let my shoulder do the work.

"Don't force it," he would say, "just drag it easy and give the teeth a chance to bite." (105)

This is the father whose advice is sage, honest, and true: "If you're going to cut a piece of wood, you owe it to the tree to cut it straight." From the father's principled example his son learns the integrity and virtue of doing things right: "There is an unspoken morality in seeking the level and the plumb. A house will stand, a table will bear weight, the sides of a box will hold together only if the joints are square and the members upright" (107).

"Tools" offers not even a hint of the alcoholic father's "ugly second self" who towers over his cowering family in "Under the Influence," "terrible in his rage" like the "Old Testament Yaweh." This is the man, "eyes blazing, voice booming," who drunkenly twists his wife's "neck back until she gapes up at him" in "the nightly quarrel," then "lifts over her skull a glass quart bottle of milk, the milk running down his forearm, and yells at her, 'Say just one more word, one goddamn word, and I'll shut you up!'" (15). From his unprincipled example his son, betrayed time after time by this man transformed by drink from "a buddy into a bully," "a skilled carpenter . . . into a bumbler" (7), learns the shame and the horror of doing things all wrong.

Sometimes in nonfiction—from my own experience as an essayist, often—the actual facts are not only shaped but altered in the name of
art—or, one could argue, in the name of truth. Autobiographical theorists
and practitioners are in accord on this point, as anyone knows who has
tried to construct—or reconstruct—a dialogue days, even years, after an
event when the words were not written down. The best autobiographers
recreate the music through whatever words suit the purpose; a literal ren-
dition might kill the spirit of the event or its interpretation. In “Design and
Lie in American Autobiography,” Timothy Dow Adams summarizes the
current understanding of both critics and autobiographers:

Whether the key terms [design and lie] around which this chapter is organized
are taken individually or together, the inescapable conclusion is that each word is
complicated, ambiguous, inseparable from other terms, and finally paradoxical.
Design, truth, and autobiography collectively name the autobiographical para-
dox. This form of writing, which may or may not be a genre, possesses a peculiar
kind of truth through a narrative composed of the author’s metaphors of self
[an allusion to James Olney’s Metaphors of Self] that attempt to reconcile the
individual events of a lifetime by using a combination of memory and imagina-
tion—all performed in a unique act that partakes of a therapeutic fiction mak-
ing, rooted in what really happened, and judged both by the standards of truth
and falsity and by the standards of success as an artistic creation” (3).

Much of the best writing in America today is autobiographical belleslet-
tic nonfiction—essays and full-length works—by a host of writers includ-
ing Judith Ortiz Cofer, Frank Conroy, Annie Dillard, Gretel Ehrlich, Louise
Erdrich, Maxine Hong Kingston, Barry Lopez, Nancy Mairs, Richard
Rodriguez, Gary Soto, Amy Tan, Geoffrey Wolff, and Tobias Wolff, as well
as Scott Russell Sanders. It is not surprising that many of these writers are
also novelists, and thereby skilled in using the techniques of fiction in their
nonfiction works.

In “Narrative Knowers, Expository Knowledge,” Anne DiPardo presents
a spirited defense of the artistry and sophistication of personal essays, in
contrast to the “soulless, spineless sort of prose [that students] are com-
monly led to emulate in the name of ‘exposition.’” Her critique is as telling
as the narrative mode she defends: “Whence comes the assumption that
depersonalized, disembedded writing [in expository essays] is somehow
more intellectually advanced” than is narrative writing? Who “decided
that sophisticated expression deletes the expressor, laundering out that
idiosyncrasy of voice and perspective that reveals the individual behind
the text” (63–64)?

As with jazz, whose high-culture status hardly needs defending these
days, writers and astute teachers of essays, in acknowledging the artistry as
DiPardo does, acknowledge the art. Anyone who’s ever written essays—not articles—or played jazz understands from the inside out why essays are neither casual *jeux d’esprit*, mere bagatelles, and why they are not second class.

**ESSAY-(STILL)-IN-PROGRESS: Ain’t Misbehavin’,**
**OR It’s Labor Day, Happy New Year**

Labor Day is really New Year’s Day. Teachers and students, from pre-kindergarten through graduate school, know this in their bones. For the year’s major predictable changes come with the major break, summertime. The rest of the year proceeds more smoothly, with holidays occurring at intervals like walnuts in a brownie, pleasant but not disruptive contrasts to the batter matrix. Except for traumas, which never occur on schedule unless you count Christmas.

Labor Day, the end of the rainbow, is the day of resolutions and painful scorekeeping that make January 1 almost irrelevant. And this September, once again, I’ve flunked, seduced by New England’s summer charms. Why did I spend so much time hanging out—yes, that’s exactly what it was—with family and friends? And so little time working, preparing for classes, that when school starts tomorrow I won’t be ready. I never am.

Labor Day is named only too well as we try to accomplish in twenty-four hours everything we intended to do throughout the summer and put off until now. The days that stretched full-length in the sun, languid and long, from June through August are cut short by the morning’s unmistakable chill. The Japanese beetles finally put an end to conspicuous consumption and equally conspicuous sex, leaving the zinnias and black eyed Susans free for a blaze of terminal glory. We make only a cup of hummingbird food at a time, four tablespoons of water to one of sugar, instead of the usual quart, knowing that all too soon the voracious diners will leave our hospitality for their nonstop flight to South America. The sun sets earlier, and we welcome the opportunity to enjoy a phenomenon I first heard labeled when we lived in Virginia “good sleeping weather.” And it is, too. The handmade quilt, kicked to the floor even during the air conditioned nights, is reinstated, and we can overlap without sticking together.

I have been picking and drying herbs for the past six weeks, and today is the day to pack their dessicated fragrance into the glass jars saved since last September for this honor. Every year my husband and I try to give homemade Christmas presents to special people. One year it was sheep potholders, with fleecy backs and tails; we still see their surprisingly bovine visages peering from our friends’ kitchens. Another year it was oriental plum sauce,
a rich maroon sweet-and-sour that we also encountered, alas, moldering at the back of a neighbor's refrigerator the following August. Two years ago it was ceramic cooky stamps, with recessed initials or designs to make embossed cookies. My favorite is a pineapple pattern that now stands on little ceramic feet, toes pointed out, on my mother's kitchen windowsill.

This year it will be herbs. Dill seeds. Dill weed. Fennel—we'll have pounds of seeds because we were away when the bulbous vegetable matured, and came home to find the resulting stalks the texture and toughness of bamboo. Sage, it really is sage green. Chives, which dry a delicate brown. Pungent rosemary, though the parent plant will be brought indoors in a tub for the winter. A lobed-leaved plant which we have decided to call marjoram after concluding that it doesn't taste like oregano. Lavender for potpourri and fragrant sheets. Everybody's got mint, so ours will just wait out the winter where it grows behind the toolshed. And three sizes of thyme, the creeping variety drying on cooky sheets beside each telephone. I pull off the tiny leaves during conversations.

My favorite, basil, is harder for me to give away. I could bathe in it. It's easy to understand why Keats's legendary heroine, Isabella, buried her lover's decapitated head in a pot of basil. Watering it every day with her tears, she'd have had to inhale its sweet sexy spiciness, amorous memento of an unconsummated love. Uncorking its delicate glass container reanimates the legend. Pesto is even better, essence of basil enhanced with olive oil, pine nuts, parmesan, and as much garlic as I can sneak in before my husband notices. I make it all summer long by the quart, the kitchen redolent of green sensuousness, and freeze recycled jam jars full. Then comes the moral dilemma. Can I bear to part with any of it? We keep some in the family by giving it to our son and daughter-in-law, happy first anniversary. Another jar goes to an old boyfriend we visit—see what you missed. I decide not to take any to my sister-in-law for our Labor Day cookout, rationalizing that she has her own recipes and likes to make everything her own way. So we take Martin's homemade bread and a pie, rhubarb from our garden. There, in solitary splendor on her gleaming refrigerator door is a recipe for pesto—different from mine.

Now the panic is here. We can't get everything put off all summer done in one day, we can hardly begin. Why did I wait until last week to dry clean the clothes and wash all twenty sweaters that should have spent the summer, dust-free, in mothproof bags? Well, I can skip the bags now that we'll be wearing the clothes soon enough. If they still fit; we inhale in anticipation of the struggle ahead. Maybe we should only look frontways in the mirror. Why didn't we swim more, drive less? Why have we put off reupholstering the couch, insulating the porch, painting the deck?
didn’t I finish writing the book that I left half-done at the end of last summer, with an ominous September deadline? I only looked at the pile of manuscript to blow off the dust or disentangle the spiderwebs before another batch of friends or relatives arrived to visit us in rural Connecticut. Oh, I read some, wrote some, even taught a couple short courses, always putting off the really big job and now it’s too late. If the publisher cancels the contract it will be love’s labors lost.

How could I justify taking a vacation with so much undone? The more we aspire to do, the less we seem to finish. If we waited until all the work was done, life would be over before we’d had a vacation. So we went with pleasure to our niece’s wedding, and re-met cousins we hadn’t seen since our own wedding thirty-two years ago. So I went with four of my best friends from college freshman year to the Maine coast in June, after lunch in New Hampshire with my mother; our visit became a spontaneous three-day symposium on what we wanted from college and life and men thirty-five years ago, and how changing realities affected the fulfillment of those great expectations. So we spent a full four hours at our son’s graduation from MIT, snapping his picture on the closed-circuit TV monitor only to realize after the fact that we could have done so, live, from a viewing platform. It didn’t matter anyway—we’d forgotten to put film in the camera. So we visited, and hosted, a superabundance of oldest and dearest friends throughout the summer—colleagues from several schools where we’ve taught; visitors from Nova Scotia, Switzerland, China, Iran; Williamsburg friends with whom we shared a decade of collaborative dinners; former students, metamorphosed into friends and fellow teachers and writers; in-laws new and old, one recuperating from cancer; friends’ children now become our friends, with babies of their own.

These are the people who will get the herbs, even the pesto. These are the people who take higher priority than completing the house repairs and writing the book. If I have missed one deadline, I will have kept others of my own choosing. These people are the reason I have waited until the day before classes to begin preparation. But then, I’ve been preparing for my classes, like my friendships, all the days of my life. To enter that classroom the day after Labor Day will be like meeting friends, old and new, with a mixture of fear and delight, vulnerability and knowledge and passion and hope. I will do all I can to see that we have a happy new year.

TEACHING ESSAYS AS JAZZ: That’s a Plenty

In the next chapter, I argue that we English teachers should write what we teach. Here I’ve tried, by example, to make the case that we should
teach what we write, and that understanding the jazz elements of both the compositions and the composing processes should help us generate the music to accompany the words.

Now that you’ve heard “What I Did on My Summer Vacation” there’s not much more to say. I wrote eight drafts of this essay seven years ago to find out whether I could practice what I and Peter Elbow and Jane Tompkins and Susan Leonardi and Rich Murphy and Nancy Sommers and a host of others now preach and give witness to by their example. Some of the ideas have migrated to the “Academic Rhythm” section of chapter ten, “Subverting the Academic Masterplot,” where they have been translated into that new context.

Yet I’m not satisfied with this essay, which I continue to regard as a work in progress, especially the ending. I’ve been tinkering with it intermittently ever since, because I remain troubled by the questions that perennially plague self-critical writers and thoughtful teachers. Is “It’s Labor Day. . .” or any personal-sounding essay for that matter, too embedded in trivia, in ephemera to send out in public? Or does it transcend the precious and the personal to address, as I intend, matters of general relevance? Can city folk tolerate its country context—and does this matter? Is it, God forbid, sentimental, or—even worse—solipsistic? Does the resonance of my personal experience interfere with my critical judgment? Is the essay written with sufficient intellectual rigor to ensure clear thinking? coherence? distinguished writing? Do its relaxed language, its sounds and syntax undercut or reinforce its message (see Elbow 1991)? Does the worked-over, revised and re-revised writing in fact retain the flexibility of jazz, the play and interplay, the sounds and the rhythm that reinforce the sense?

Anne DiPardo embeds the answers to all of these questions and more in her brilliant argument for teaching narrative writing in composition classes, “Narrative Knowers, Expository Knowledge: Discourse as Dialectic.” Taking as her motif Burke’s assertion that “Only those voices from without are effective which speak in the language of a voice within,” DiPardo disputes the rhetorical basis for the pedagogical assumption that “prefers abstractions to stories and fails to grasp their dynamic interplay.” Writing teachers should perceive narrative and exposition “as poles of a dialectic, with personal experience informing one’s interest in abstract knowledge beyond the self, the understanding becoming enlarged as it ‘takes in’ what is ‘out there.’” The best thinking and writing, she says, are concurrently “personal and public, both infused with private meaning and focused upon the world beyond the self.” If we deny such narrative
knowing we “rob students of personal meaning; to fail to help them grasp its place in the larger human experience is ultimately to trivialize both” (59, 88).

DiPardo has made explicit what we, as teachers of writing, should understand at “the deep heart’s core.” With this understanding we can not only help our students to write essays as jazz, we can write such essays ourselves. So instead of worrying about how such writing, and such a process, can reach closure, I say, “Let us begin.” Take it again from the top.

NOTES
1. Nor, for that matter, are the Confessions of Montaigne’s countryman, Jean Jacques Rousseau, what they appear to be at first blush, uncontrolled outpourings dictated by the “sensitive heart” of a Romantic who “felt before I thought” (19). Indeed, Rousseau explains that in order to convey the “lively and headstrong emotions” of his “passionate temperament,” he composes in his head, shaping and reshaping paragraphs mentally “for five or six nights before they [are] fit to put down on paper.” He laments, “My blotted, scratched, confused, illegible manuscripts attest to the pain they have cost me” (113–14).

2. In addition to being a prizewinning novelist, Gass is to essays what Joyce is to fiction. See, for instance, any of the essays in Habitations of the Word, The World Within the Word, or On Being Blue.

3. Chef Wolfgang Puck explains the difference between novice and experienced chefs: “Young people are very complicated, very pretentious. It’s a power thing. The more insecure you are, the more complicated and rigid you are. The more secure you get, the more you simplify. Your tastes get simpler and at the same time, more inquisitive, more exotic, more urbane (O’Neill, 64). This is an apt analogy for the major difference between many novice writers of articles, who mask their insecurities with complicated jargon and convoluted syntax, and the free-spirited writers of essays.

See also Levine; and “Music-sound-text-image and the futures of improvisation,” Roger Dean’s discussion of improvisation in the arts, including painting, poetry, films and videos, theatre, electronic production of sounds and images, “poempaintings,” “poetry/talk,” and other blended and blurred genres (177–90).