CHAPTER ELEVEN

Coming of Age in the Field That Had No Name

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

Theodore Roethke, from “The Waking”

THE CALL OF STORIES

From the moment I heard the call of stories, seduced at the age of six by the siren song of Dr. Seuss, I wanted to tell stories of my own. I would become a Great Writer. So I turned, naturally, to their biographies. If I could figure out how great writers wrote I could learn to do it myself.

I longed to get locked into the local library—a gracious white-columned Georgian edifice shared by the town of Durham and the University of New Hampshire—where my ambition was to read all the books. If I could be surrounded by the works of Great Writers twenty-four hours a day maybe their strategies, as well as their substance, would seep in. To this end, I plotted. I would smuggle in my battered blue school lunchbox (eating in the library was strictly forbidden), secreting among the peanut butter sandwiches saved from lunch a flashlight instead of a thermos; I could survive on water from the drinking fountain. I planned to hide in Biology at closing time, a remote section of the stacks whose illustrated volumes I had often consulted in identifying specimens for the Girl Scout “Wild Flower Finder” and “Bird Finder” badges. But that was where the man in the long raincoat lurked, I had seen him, so after everyone left I intended to move straight to the Fiction and Biography section and stay there all night. Surrounded by books, I could “take my waking slow.”

But what if a lingering librarian came after me? I knew the tread of her sensible shoes, and could elude her. What if I were pursued, even caught, by the man in the raincoat? or the night watchman, with a flashlight of his own? or even the police? I would have to improvise.

Day after day I would run the three snowy blocks from school to the library’s welcoming warmth. Day after day I would await my chance. But invariably as the librarians turned out the lights at closing time I would
pull on my woollen snowsuit, wrestle to the door a stack of books I could barely see over, and wait in the icy darkness for my father, a chemical engineering professor, to take me home. I would have to learn the secrets of the Great Writers some other way.

LEARNING TO WALK THE WALK

I went to the University of Michigan still intent on becoming a Great Writer, expanded now by a desire to become a college professor—a Great Writing Teacher—as well. It’s easy to say now, forty years later, “Oh, I’ve always been in composition studies, as well as in literature.” But in the 1950s and 60s the field now so vast and so protean was, simply, inconceivable. There was no field—let alone discipline—that one could name, and there were no specifically labeled composition studies courses, no research models or literature, no mentors either at Michigan or anywhere else. There were, however, ways to learn how to read literature and to write and to study writing. I would “learn by going where I had to go,” for at Michigan there was the latitude, through invention and improvisation, to put what I would study together in ways neither I nor anyone else had previously imagined.

The available intellectual context at Michigan at mid-century for what would coalesce as composition studies thirty years later consisted of such courses as Old and Middle English, historical and structural (pre-Chomsky) linguistics, philosophy of aesthetics, and creative writing. For a doctoral candidate in English to enroll in these courses in addition to the requisite doctoral seminars that in fact did march from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf (thereby replicating the undergraduate curriculum) was tolerated as bizarre eclecticism; my advisor even let me sign up for an advanced biology course in genetics. Why I expected to understand writers’ biology from a course that began with fruit flies and sweet peas I cannot now remember, but my math gave out as the huge humming jar of F16 generation fruit flies, red-eyed and white-eyed, was passed up and down the aisles. I switched to an American lit course just in time to walk in on “I heard a fly buzz when I died”—music to my ears.

The usual route to Michigan’s doctorate in English, modeled after Harvard’s, bypassed the act of belletristic writing altogether, and followed the traditional path through the literary canon. Of the several thousand works on the understated eleven page reading list—one line reads “William Shakespeare, Complete Works (Including poems)” —the only ones that occasionally appear in contemporary composition studies are I.A. Richards’ Principles of Literary Criticism and Kenneth Burke’s The
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Philosophy of Literary Form. Yet Michigan faculty cared a great deal about what their students were reading and how they wrote; such teachers as Sheridan Baker, Donald Hall, and Arthur Eastman (with seven other Michigan colleagues) were leaders in the writing and editing of such highly influential textbooks of the 1950s–80s as *The Practical Stylist*, *A Writer's Reader*, and *The Norton Reader*. At Michigan throughout my graduate as well as undergraduate years, I took a writing course every semester—exposition, fiction, play writing, but no poetry. I would stick to prose.

Primarily from these writing courses I came to understand firsthand what I continue to learn and relearn with everything I write and what I now teach to every student in every course. Most important, I learned that it is necessary to improvise, to learn by trial, error, educated guesses, and wild surmise not only what a writer has to say, but how one is going to say it. I learned that an experience (or a reading) can be rendered in innumerable versions, voices, modes; that writing in any mode can send numerous messages with social, political, cultural, ethical (and many other) implications; that dishonesty can destroy a piece, ethically and aesthetically. I learned that style is intimate kin to substance and to self; that the unsaid—de-emphasis, omissions, gaps, erasures—is potentially as significant as what is said, what is emphasized. I learned the importance of the critical rigor that undergirds writing well for an external audience—that every word, every syntactic structure, every punctuation mark, every space counts. I learned the pleasures of stylistic precision. I learned to read as a writer, to write as a reader, with an intimate understanding of the writer's craft, the writer's art (see chapter four). In short, I learned by writing what I now expect my students to learn, also by writing.

COUNTERPLOTTING THE MASTERPLOT

I did not, however, learn from these courses what stories to tell. If anything, a decade of subjecting the Great Writers' great books to New Critical analysis was as intimidating as the jar of fruit flies had been. For the subtext of critical analysis that I came to understand in literature course after literature course was that, as a young American woman with a Midwestern orientation, my own stories didn't count. And neither did my style, always precariously close to the personal.

What stories, after all, did I have to tell? I who hadn't dared to spend a stolen night in the library did not dare to spend stolen nights anywhere else either. I had not roamed the high seas, fought at the front, or hit the road, the stuff of men's stories from here to eternity. I had not contemplated patricide or suicide, the 50s woman writer's road to immortality. I was sleep
deprived from \textit{gemütlichkeit}, not \textit{weltschmerz}, pushing the 10:30 social curfew every night, then writing course papers until dawn. Lacking shades, leather, or a Harley, I couldn’t even fake a literary persona. Ann Arbor had, at the time, no coffee houses, no cafes, only Drake’s Sandwich Shoppe and the Old German restaurant; a single beer led invariably to sleep, not profundity. If there was a salon, I wasn’t invited. I regret sounding so conventional, but take heart from Eudora Welty’s observation that “All serious daring starts from within.”

My roommate used to say that I hadn’t suffered enough to be a Great Writer. That in my mind I lived life on the margin as the principal actress in a series of improvisatory roles in the guerrilla theater of life didn’t seem to count. That I was heading for a Ph.D. (“taking a man’s seat,” my advisor sneered) in an era when P.H.T. (Putting Hubby Through) was the norm hardly seemed the stuff of fiction. That I wanted to do research in an area that didn’t exist seemed to me perfectly natural; as long I could figure out how to do the work, labels didn’t matter. Nor did my parents’ label for the man I would marry, “That Jew.”

My parents had never approved of anyone I dated in either high school or college. They mocked the youth who invited me to the junior prom, “He’s Catholic and besides, he’s too fat.” They ridiculed the grammar of my high school boyfriend, a voc-ed guy who built me an Adirondack chair in carpentry class and dyed his suede shoes bright blue—to match the pair his mother got for me from the shoe factory where she worked. By the time I got to college I had learned it was futile to explain or to argue about any of my decisions, professional or personal. “What good is literary criticism?” jeered my father the scientist, and when I’d try to answer he’d shoot back, “Prove it!” So I remained silent as they condemned one undergrad du jour (“His grades aren’t good enough”—that meant he had some Bs) and froze out the parents of another whose Hungarian neighborhood was squeezed among the railroad tracks of downtown Detroit, not far from my German father’s own birthplace.

“Break it off,” hissed my parents, their lukewarm Christianity boiling as Martin, a philosophy major turned social psychologist, met them before leaving for a master’s year in Edinburgh. Treating him like water, my father spoke only to me, “Martin can’t be much of a man—he’s too nice to you. Besides,” he added, “if you get married you won’t finish your Ph.D.” There was no point in explaining that Martin and I had already vowed to enhance each other’s personal and professional lives in whatever ways we could; I simply accepted Michigan’s offer of a TAship. “Take off your ring!” they ordered when I returned to New Hampshire for Christmas vacation. My
rebuttal blazed on my finger. “We won’t come to your wedding.” So I invested what money I had in a one-way ticket to England, where Martin and I planned to marry and ad lib a summer of European travel.

“People can’t stand Jews,” my parents reiterated in June when I returned to pack. “As Martin’s wife, you’ll be the victim of prejudice for the rest of your life.” I was stuffing everything I owned into a suitcase. (The Adirondack chair sits on my mother’s deck to this day.) “If you marry Martin,” they proceeded to prove their claim, “we will have nothing to do with you, or your husband, or any children you might have.” The lock snapped shut, and in shock I left.

How could I dare to tell that story, and the stories within that story, that I myself scarcely understood? How could I find the right language to write about what burned at the bone? In a culture that celebrated the family cohesiveness I myself held as an ideal, who would listen? So when Martin and I returned to Michigan I excised the vertical pronoun from my repertoire and concentrated on critical papers, academic exercises that I believed I had no right to publish either. Who was I in comparison with all those well-known literary critics?

It took another quarter century to finally believe in my heart what I knew in my mind from analyzing the stories of others, that to write autobiography is a way to make sense of things that don’t make sense. It took that long to acknowledge to myself that true to the American tradition, I too had the right to sing the song of myself—or at least, to try. And it took twenty-five years of encouragement, indeed urging, from Martin, who trusted my storytelling long before I trusted myself, for me to write those stories down.

MY DOCTORAL DISSERTATION, A COMPOSITION STUDY BEFORE THERE WERE COMPOSITION STUDIES

In a pioneering seminar on literary biography I had become intrigued by three interrelated questions, existential and epistemological, “What is the truth, the meaning of a life?” “What is the creative process of Great Writers?” “How do you know?” In the early 60s these questions were asked by philosophers, by novelists, and by individual biographers, not by critics. Except for book reviews and Leon Edel’s slender volume on why he was a Freudian literary biographer, there was hardly any criticism on either biography or autobiography. In that course the students had to work in primary sources, the biographies and autobiographies themselves, and in the biographers’ source materials—letters, diaries, documents, manuscripts. Everything we investigated was original, and the possibilities were endless.
Everything we discussed leapt or ignored the boundaries—between literature and history, philosophy and psychology, fact and fiction, belletristic writing and criticism. The literary landscape, grim and drab from critical strip mining, with deep pits around the Major Literary Figures, became instantly reconfigured as a glimmering Garden of Eden, with a myriad of possible new avenues of access to familiar literary figures.

In quest of how the Great Writers wrote, I decided to write my doctoral dissertation on literary biography, "How Literary Biographers Use Their Subjects' Works: A Study of Biographical Method, 1865–1962." This was a study of reading and writing texts about the writing of texts—the biographies of writers of four centuries: a poet (George Herbert), a prose satirist (Jonathan Swift), a novelist (Charles Dickens), and a playwright (George Bernard Shaw). I'd have included women writers, too, had there been enough good biographies for my study. However, I needed at least six for each subject, and the major biographers, women and men alike, wrote mostly on men.

Composition studies today provides the language (italicized in what follows) for me to explain what I was doing thirty-five years ago. I wanted to understand how the two dozen biographers in my study worked—i.e. constructed their subjects and constructed their texts. In order to do this, I had to read the bulk of their sources—all of the authors' primary works and significant criticism of these, the authors' published correspondence, and other biographies—of the primary authors as well as others by the biographers in my study. I had to read as much critical material on biography as I could locate, biographies of figures prominently associated with my subject (Hester Thrale, John Forster, Ellen Ternan, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, among others), and criticism of writers often compared with my subjects (Donne, Pope, Thackeray, Wilde, among others). Thus my dissertation on textual construction involved a host of interrelated topics common to composition studies.

In part, my dissertation was a study of reading—in this case, how literary critics and historians read their source materials, primary and secondary—the subjects' works and correspondence, earlier (often rival) biographies, criticism, and a host of other documents. Thus my dissertation became, perforce, a study of the nature of evidence, and of the methodology and rhetoric employed in using that evidence. I was especially hoping to see how biographers accounted for and understood their subjects' creative processes (read writing processes) in the diverse genres. But except for one who included a painting of Herbert being inspired by an angel in a garden (as good an explanation as I would ever get), every biographer
throughout the entire century of biographies I studied read every author’s works in every genre as “personal equations,” straightforward or thinly veiled autobiography. Characteristically, Carl Van Doren asserted, “Gulliver’s travels were Swift’s travels. . . . Among the Houyhnhnms [in Book IV] Gulliver was almost undisguisedly Swift” (307, 191).

When the biographers weren’t reading their subjects’ works as direct transference of personal experience into poetry, fiction, even nonfiction, they read the works as emotional analogues and psychological projections of the authors’ lives. For instance, Dickens’s biographers claimed that the more vivid and intense Dickens’s novels were, the more closely they resembled his life. Characters whose initials were D.C. and C.D., such as David Copperfield and Charles Darnay, were scrutinized for particular resemblances to the author. Thus Edgar Johnson’s Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph, well-received in 1952 (and reissued to equal acclaim in 1977), found both David Copperfield and Pip in Great Expectations “deeply revealing” of “the wounds that were still unhealed after a quarter of a century” (678; see also 982–83). These biographers read as historians of persuasions literary, cultural, ecclesiastical, social, political; as critics, they read as Anglicans, Marxists, Freudian or Jungian analysts. The women biographers read as men (see How Literary 93). No matter what their stance, even the biographers writing when New Criticism was the academically sanctioned way to read primary texts always read creative works as virtually unmediated autobiography.

Thus, my dissertation was also a study of the rhetorical conventions and parameters of a scarcely examined genre of nonfiction prose. It was a study of rhetorical arrangement—including the selection, nature, and organization of evidence; and of emphases and omissions (aha—gaps!). It was a study of personae, of both the primary authors and the biographers, and thus a study of style—particularly syntax, vocabulary, and tone. It was a study of reader response to the authors’ primary texts over four centuries.

Nevertheless—and here’s the caveat—because this was also a quantitative study as well as a qualitative study, it was highly unusual for a literature dissertation at that time or at any time. In it I examined how often biographers used each subject’s works in particular ways and presented the results in tables—to the astonishment of my committee. The tables, in fact, signalled an affinity with the scientific method, an inductive process common in those composition studies from the 1960s to the present that deal with numbers of things (students, papers, errors, words in T-units), including the 30,000 item data base of essays in textbooks I am currently assembling to study “the essay canon.” I had unwittingly prepared to do
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during a brief—yes, sophomoric—period when I decided that I would be an even Greater Writer if I learned about people through a double major in psychology as well as English. I plunged in by taking statistics, where I learned how to do another kind of reading—formulas, charts, tables, graphs, scores, percentages; how to do and interpret statistical surveys; and the grammar of number crunching. Although this requirement was so alien to the literature I loved that I never took another psych course, I was able to use what I'd learned in my dissertation.

For, in response to my basic research question, "How do literary biographers use their subjects' works," I identified the sixteen most common ways, among them: "life contributes to works" (e.g. Dickens's claim, "The Brothers Cheeryble LIVE."), "works differ from life," "works reveal information"—coded or uncoded—"about life" (such as a description of Dickens's childhood home from "Dullborough Town" in The Uncommercial Traveler 146) and the most prevalent of all, "autobiographical interpretations of works." Then I collected the data (how many times each biographer used one of the identified ways), tabulated it ("let me count the ways"), and interpreted it. Interpretation added a number of whys to the how question, in particular, Why do literary biographers through the centuries persist in reading poetry, satire, fiction, and drama as unadulterated autobiography? (I did not, however, anticipate that critics would soon be reading autobiography as fiction.) Why do even careful scholars and psychoanalysts ignore the creative process? From these interpretations of the evidence I drew my inductive conclusion.

Although this configuration of concerns may have been unique in literary dissertations of the time, its individual methodological features (except for the tables) have been the staples of twentieth century literary criticism, as they are now in composition studies. That composition studies now provides new labels should signal a closing of the gap between literature and composition rather than a demarcation of separate and unrelated concerns.

"TRUST YOURSELF. YOU KNOW MORE THAN YOU THINK YOU DO."

However, in the early 1960s the fact that my dissertation was remote from the community of literary scholars and that I was fascinated by the writing processes of real writers cemented my status in exile. Compared to the expulsion from my family this ostracism seemed remote and unreal. The first Christmas after our marriage, I had written to my parents, "We're driving"—part of Martin's dowry was a baby blue Nash Rambler—"to New Hampshire for the holidays." "You can come," my mother's letter said, "but not Martin." We sent them, that year, a present we couldn't afford, a sleek
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satiny pewter pitcher from Amsterdam, and we stayed at Michigan and studied for exams.

We would have the ideal family of our own, we promised each other then and often, and we would become the best parents we could. This meant a parenthood of continual improvisation. We'd invent our own roles and learn them, babies in arms, rather than following either our parents' rule-bound scripts or the ethos of the time. For our own mothers, and for most of our peers, biology determined the destiny of a woman's lifelong servitude to spouse and children. A 1960s variation allowed the Good (middle-class) Mother to work outside the home until the sixth month of her first pregnancy, then to put professional work on hold until her youngest of—preferably four—children had graduated from high school.

But Martin and I never regarded work and family as antithetical, and I expected to devote ample time to both. I had written the bulk of my dissertation while I was pregnant, and finished it after we moved to Cleveland, with Bard (named for you know who) on my lap or in a playpen nearby. I was accustomed to working with a child in the room—I always commandeered the biggest room in the house, so we'd have plenty of space. And I kept right on after Laird (named for you know where) was born, for it was vitally important to me that our children would always feel secure and welcome at home. Although the salary I earned from part-time teaching at Western Reserve paid a sitter eighteen hours a week, I was glad that the intellectual passions of my life, reading and writing about reading and writing, could be largely pursued at home rather than in a lab or in an office. So I learned to work in the interstices of the car pool and nursery school schedules, housework and hospitality, and at night after everyone else was in bed.

When Martin wasn't at his research job, he was being a 90s daddy, thirty years ahead of his time. Thus even while we were encouraged by Dr. Spock's cardinal dictum, "Trust yourself," we were defying the division of the sexes that pervaded the 40s, 50s and 60s editions of Baby and Child Care. Our two sons, like Konrad Lorenz's ducklings, imprinted themselves on whichever parent they saw first in the morning.

I still couldn't tell my own stories, but I now felt free—indeed, obliged—to tell someone else's, for analyzing other peoples' literary biographies mandated that I write one. It would be, like my dissertation, a hybrid of literary and what we now call composition studies. In 1985 Robert Scholes articulated in Textual Power the philosophy implicit in all my teaching and research ever since I earned my Ph.D. The best way to understand a text, says Scholes, is to create a text in response to it: "Our job..."
is not to produce ‘readings’ for our students, but to give them the tools for producing their own.” We can and should introduce our students to “the codes upon which all textual production depends,” and then encourage them to write their own texts in response to the literature they read (25–6).

Indeed, even as in Scholesian innocence I was finishing my dissertation, I had decided that the best way to understand biographical method was to write a biography myself. What could I learn from the creation of a primary work that wasn’t apparent when I analyzed other people’s literary biographies? What kinds of connections would I make between the subject’s works and the life? Could one ever be understood in isolation from the other? Did biography as a genre necessarily misrepresent the creative process, or did the biographers I’d studied fail to understand how creative writers wrote because they themselves didn’t write creatively? I still wanted to find out how a Major Writer actually wrote books—what I might have called research on the composing process (a term Janet Emig had yet to invent), big time. It never occurred to me to begin with something small and manageable, say, an article; I would leap straightaway into what I can see now is the researcher’s black hole—a full-length biography, where one can never know too much about one’s subject. The biography I wanted to write would amplify my dissertation research, rather than replicate it, a direct means to tease out and test out its methodological implications (again italics identify composition studies language).

I decided to write the biography of a significant American writer, embedded in the context of the times. Because I wanted to be free to test out my own theories, and to avoid excessive dependence on secondary sources, the biography—a single case study—would have to be written mainly from primary sources, a mixture of literary, social, cultural, and political history and creative nonfiction (another term waiting to be invented). I would have to be the subject’s first biographer. That I never conceived of discovering and resurrecting a neglected, safely dead woman writer or her work, such as Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, or Kate Chopin, was another phenomenon of the time; these subjects would await later distinguished feminist research.

Characteristically, I chose to do research the hard—but to me the most exciting—way. I decided to write about a living subject, to whose life, milieu, and primary documents I would have unrestricted access, without other interpreters (say, biographers, historians, critics, or journalists) as intermediaries. Thus I would have to be a more unobtrusive participant-observer than, say, James Boswell. I would have to like this as yet undetermined subject; why expend all the effort this would take on an uncongenial
figure? To ensure my intellectual independence, that person would have to agree in advance to cooperate but not to interfere with my writing. That these sound biographical principles embedded equal mixtures of intellectual arrogance (read chutzpah) and naivete is apparent only in retrospect. How I, a novice researcher, with no publication, no reputation, no status, no institutional support, and no funding, could expect a prominent author to agree to these conditions was a Boswellian act of faith, hope, and innocence.

COMING OF AGE WITH DOCTOR SPOCK

Geography, maternity, economics, and the middle-class mores of the mid-60s were as influential (some might say restrictive) as passion in my choice of subject. My two children were infants; I couldn’t go very far away from Cleveland for very long. So I would have to write about the most significant author living in Cleveland, at a time when that riot-torn city was labeled “the Mistake on the Lake.” In fact, I decided to write about the most popular author in America at the time, Western Reserve colleague and Cleveland Heights neighbor, Benjamin Spock, M.D., whose Baby and Child Care had for twenty years been selling a steady million copies annually, ever since its publication in 1946, its sales surpassed only by the Bible. I knew at the outset that I would have to penetrate the myths, public and private, surrounding this person, even with the considerable affinity toward the subject that is requisite for investing oneself in research of any kind.

But I did not know a subtle way to approach the national hero he was at the time. So I simply called him up and got right to the point, “I’ve recently finished my Michigan doctoral dissertation on literary biography . . . and now I’d like to write a real biography—of you.” At 64, on the verge of retirement from his pediatric professorship, Spock was as unaware of celebrity protocol as I was. Within an hour of our first meeting he granted me access—unrestricted and exclusive—to a lifetime accumulation of primary sources: professional papers, manuscripts, correspondence (including some ten thousand letters from readers of his book), “royalty statements, tax returns, newspaper clippings beginning with his undergraduate days at Yale, his Olympic gold medal (Yale crew, 1929),” and magnificent family photographs. Trusting me more than I trusted myself, he provided weekly interviews; letters of introduction to friends, even enemies; the opportunity to follow him around the hospital, attend classes, and sit in on his pediatric practicum. No strings. He even lent me a white coat so I’d blend into the hospital milieu, and I hired his former secretary (herself at home with her own baby), who knew his voice and how to spell
all the proper names, to transcribe so many hours of interview tapes that we wore out two recorders ("Growing" 278).

During the five years of writing and rewriting *Doctor Spock: Biography of a Conservative Radical* (1972) I became an ad lib researcher, continually improvising my research methods beyond the boundaries of even the unconventional literary scholarship I’d used in my dissertation. What had begun as a study of a significant writer’s *composing process* (which Spock re-enacted, pacing the floor and, amidst long silences, dictating the first draft to his wife, who typed it) and *publishing history*, was becoming, in part, an *ethnographic case study* that incorporated *cultural* as well as *literary criticism*. So, perforce, I learned to draw on the methods of *ethnography* and *cultural anthropology*, *history of medicine*, *intellectual and cultural history*. These coalesced in addressing such questions as “What were the origins of Spock’s pediatric advice? the innovations? the influences?” as they pertained to what was in part a study of the *making of knowledge* not in pediatrics, but in the *advice manuals of popular culture*.

To understand the book in context required as well the methods of *investigative journalism* and *participant observation*, particularly because Spock in retirement was devoting most of his efforts to opposing the Vietnam War. As the scope of the biography itself continually expanded, I had to locate the source and context of each bit of information and then figure out how to get it and how to corroborate it. My sources included not only highly politicized documents, but—in this *microcosmic ethnographic study* (a comfortable concept, alien term—see chapter ten)—a plethora of peace activists, politicians, lawyers, gossipy neighbors in Cleveland Heights (we lived about a mile from the Spocks) in addition to the likely subjects—family members, doctors, editors, publishers, parents of “Spock babies” (including Margaret Mead), and the very babies themselves, my own children among them. I went on peace marches, pushing my children in their stroller, trailed by FBI snoops. I spent two summer vacations in New England and upstate New York, corroborating the details of Spock’s life while Martin took the boys to beaches and playgrounds. Our disarming entourage gained access to people guarding their privacy along with the family secrets—Sally Spock’s swimming pool, Marjorie Spock’s organic farm (“You’ll never have a sick chicken if you feed it earthworms”); how could they deny hospitality to parents with small children in tow on a hot summer afternoon?

To determine Spock’s influence, I read all his rivals. To determine Spock’s effectiveness, I checked out everything he said against my own children’s growth, health, and behavior—a research procedure that had
escaped my graduate professors' notice. What serendipity (as we named our border collie). Spock's recommended mixture of consistent firmness and love was indeed producing children of good will and good cheer. Although I couldn't cure anything, Spock's precise descriptions enabled me to become an expert diagnostician, able to spot chicken pox at a thousand paces. I also became a connoisseur of tone, as a parent and as a writer. For Spock's reassuring voice emanated from his ability to imagine concurrently the perspectives of a frightened parent and a sick baby, and calm everybody down: "A convulsion is a frightening thing to see in a child, but in most cases it is not dangerous in itself" (as opposed to a competitor's "A convulsion is terrifying to parents, but a baby rarely, if ever, dies because of one." *Doctor Spock* 125).

Thus the biography became a far more complicated rhetorical study than I had initially imagined and far more than a rhetorical study. As Spock's politics and pediatrics became inseparable, what I had conceived of as a *textual analysis* of the rhetoric of Spock's advice to parents became intertwined with an *analysis of the rhetoric of the peace movement* and of its critics. As one of the "nattering nabobs of negativism," Spock and the "Spock-marked generation" drew the wrath not only of Vice President Agnew's speech writer, William Safire, but of the Department of Justice, which indicted "The Boston Five" for conspiracy to encourage draft resistance. I had to learn enough law, in principle and in language, to write accurately about the trial, in which it became clear that the FBI (which also tapped my phone during the entire research period—"Hello, spies") had no sense of metaphor; a casual remark of irritation—a hostess's "Oh, I could kill him, he's so late for dinner!"—would be interpreted as a threat of murder. Attending and writing about the trial, which raised complex issues of ethics, human rights, and the law, and complex and contradictory ways of interpreting these, affirmed my own sense of the biographer's *professional and personal ethics*—including the importance of scrupulous accuracy, fairness to one's subject, the need to ground what one says in facts (John McPhee calls this "the literature of fact") even in the course of imaginative re-creation of scenes and characters.

Writing the biography of *Doctor Spock* reaffirmed the major lesson I'd learned from writing my dissertation, the importance of inventing flexible research methods to suit the demands of a protean subject, unpredictable and ever-evolving. And from Doctor Spock himself, the Strunk and White of baby book authors, I learned to write with clarity and absolute precision, as if a life depended on it. His friendly, accessible style knocked the dissertationese clean out of my own writing as I learned to
translate technical language into nonspecialized terms, to break up long sentences and paragraphs to please the ear and the eye. From Spock’s oral composing I learned to listen to the words, the music, the sounds of silence. I resolved never again to write in language that I wouldn’t speak, a decision that over time enabled me to create my own, human literary voice and eventually to write creative nonfiction, so thoroughly dependent on voice and the character of that speaker.

I wanted to change the world with my first hopeful volume, just as Spock had done with his. I did not. I wanted *Doctor Spock*, published in 1972, the year the pediatrician ran for President as the People’s Party candidate, to help end the Vietnam War. No luck. Having written about a popular figure, I had no illusions that *Doctor Spock* would be my entree into the world of literary scholarship; though canonical, *Baby and Child Care* belonged to the wrong canon. I hoped, of course, that the book would receive critical acclaim (it did); that it would make some money (not a chance); and that I would instantly become everyperson’s biographer of choice (alas, no). Above all, I hoped that with *Doctor Spock* I would write myself back into my parents’ proud hearts. But the only letter my father ever sent to me after my marriage was to acknowledge the gift of this book: “Congratulations on your marvelous hatchet-job.” To his profound misreading, like Cordelia in *King Lear*, I could say nothing.

“I LEARN BY GOING WHERE I HAVE TO GO”

To light out for the territory ahead is, in the American tradition, to learn by going where one has to go. With no boundaries, the only constraints are those of the imagination; the journey itself becomes the goal. Each of us who arrived in composition studies before that destination was labeled has traveled a different path, mapped a territory whose specific contours have taken shape in the course of the quest. That my particular passport to this new world, fraught with perilous promise as the unknown always is, had as its *bona fides* a dissertation on biographical method and a biography of the author of a revolutionary American book, makes it a travel document like none other.

That many of us in composition studies have taken parallel pilgrimages along other lonesome roads makes it a pleasure to sit around the campfire at professional meetings and reminisce about the good bad old days. The risks of rejection, exile, and ostracism have been a fair tradeoff for the exhilaration of working in the field we were inadvertently helping to invent. Some who grant composition studies the status of “a field” argue that it is still too haphazard, too undisciplined to be a discipline. That this—
shall we say rowdy?—field is still in the process of acquiring shape, coherence, form—a culture, and consequently a name of its own—is a continual source of promise, and of pleasure to those of us still on the journey, still learning where we have to go. What fun.

NOTE

* Some of the analysis of my biographical methodology that follows is adapted from “Growing Up With Doctor Spock,” 278–82.