Audre Lorde explores the resources the erotic can offer to women who wish to rescue their own power, their capacity for using feeling to explain and explore their lives. She describes a method women can recover in order to express fully and honestly their own experience. The erotic refuses the dichotomy between thought and feeling and between the body and the mind. It insists on the whole, on making the erotic a part of the way women come to know and come to speak. Lorde rescues the word “erotic” from associations with the pornographic and expands its meaning beyond merely sexual connotations. She suggests that the erotic is a “resource,” “spiritual” as well as physical, and that it is embedded in “unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.” The erotic is powerful; it allows for connection, for pleasure, for voice. Moreover, Lorde urges women to call upon the power of the erotic to work toward excellence in their pursuits. Lorde is speaking to and about women when she makes her claims about the necessity of the erotic as a source of power and information. Perhaps it is even rarer for a man to make such claims, given gender ideas about the place of the emotions and the place of the sensual in professional life or professional discourse.

In this essay, we suggest how Peter Elbow claims the erotic—the place of feeling and the role of the body—in all his writing. He does so in an “erotic,” that is, in a sensory, engaging, and powerful, way, not primarily in the arguments he makes about voice or process or style, but in his own speech, in the metaphors he chooses, and the in careful way he presents himself. In other words, we argue that Elbow’s voice is embodied—physical and present—in ways that bring an audience close both to Elbow’s persona and to his ideas about writing and in ways that few academic writers attempt (and few academic readers expect when
they read him for the first time). His message is made more powerful, and perhaps more problematic among some of his critics, because of the bodily imagery he uses and determined intimacy of his voice. This essay points out and explores the physical, embodied nature of Elbow’s language and style. We trace his use of bodily images and metaphors in order to illustrate and analyze the cumulative effect of a rhetoric that calls up so many physical images and provokes such personal reaction from his readers. We are less concerned with an analysis of Elbow’s theory, pedagogy, or his thirty-year efforts to help teachers and students actually write—rather than merely talk about writing—than we are in the cumulative effect of that message, how Elbow’s embodied voice becomes the argument, a way of seeing the whole of his message about readers, writers, and writing rather than its discrete parts.

Everyone seems to “know” Peter Elbow—and know him in a way that goes beyond being familiar with his work or his pedagogical/scholarly positions. Teachers and scholars in Composition, including graduate students and many undergraduates, feel as if they “know” the man, the living person behind the work. Elbow’s persona feels perhaps more intimately present to his wide-ranging audiences than any other writer in the field of Composition. Yet although his presence looms large in the minds of researchers and students, it appears as much by reputation, more by a presumed knowledge about his work than from actual study of the work itself. And his familiarity works both for and against the message his work attempts to convey. “He’s an expressivist,” a graduate student will say dismissively. Or, “He’s a liberal.” “He’s not theoretical, political, or radical.” “Have you read his work?” Kate will ask. “Well, everybody knows...” they respond. Or, “Berlin says...” This easy presumption of understanding, as well as the ease with which he seems to be contained by an unfashionable epithet—liberal, expressivist, romantic—indicates how much this intimate persona precedes and governs what those in the field know and believe about Elbow’s work.

We were in graduate school, reading theorists and researchers in a composition theory seminar, when we first encountered Peter Elbow. Hepsie remembers clearly how she tried to put a face to the name and a body to the voice that appeared in the first paragraph of the book: “Perhaps I shouldn’t try to talk to so many different kinds of people....” (Writing with Power 6) What kind of author admits that kind of hesitation? What kind of person has that sort of confidence? A writer who was that open, that powerful, demanded a body. She formed one. Reading on, she thought she could see him: Dave Garroway glasses, shirttails working loose, a little overweight, genial.

When both of us taught Writing With Power in our first-year classes, we weren’t really surprised to find that our students had much the same response.
They commented as much on the demeanor of the person on the page as they did the substance of the discussion. He says he couldn’t write his dissertation. He couldn’t write. They were amazed that the author of their textbook admitted he had problems with filling a page. They liked that admission; they liked him. Elbow’s book remains the only first-year writing text we’ve ever used that our students have actually lent to their friends in other writing classes or to their roommates. One semester, Hepsie asked students to respond to the voice they heard as they read the first couple of chapters of Writing With Power. “He sounds real,” remarked one student.

For most of his career, Elbow has in one way or the other wrestled with the problem of what’s real and not real about voice. In Writing with Power, he tentatively (always tentatively) offers these definitions: “Writing with voice is writing into which someone has breathed” (WWP 299); “Real voice is whatever yields resonance, whatever makes the words bore through” (WWP 313). Note the physicality, not only of the writer, who must breathe her own life-force into the words, but the words, which must bore through a reader’s body in order to be heard. Our experience and our students’ confirm that Elbow’s voice feels real in this physical way; we make him into a person, a physical being, we embody him because his words suggest his self.

Whether that “self” is “natural,” “real,” “unique,” and “essential” are questions that have contributed to readers’ strong reactions to Elbow’s presence on the page. At times, Elbow seems to insist on the individuality of voice: “We all have a chest cavity unique in size and shape so that each of us naturally resonates to one pitch alone” (WWP 282). He stresses the connection between the rest of the body and voice as well. Elbow says that “the metaphor of voice inevitably suggests a link with the body and with ‘weight.’ . . . After all, the body shows more of ourselves than the conscious mind does” (“About Voice” xxxvi). This connection between the revelations of the body and the mind also makes people nervous. After all, much of academic writing tends to mask, cover, or disguise the writers’ doubts, fears, or insecurities. We are struck by how much Elbow “shows” in his physical imagery. Both our mothers warned us as young girls and women not to “show” ourselves, not to reveal our true natures (assumed to be selfish and vain) in public, as in “Well, you really showed yourself that time, didn’t you?” Elbow’s connection between the unique individual body and the writers’ voice, however, seems to insist that a writer must show herself, expose herself, give herself.

But Elbow’s long-standing discussions of voice are more complicated than simply insisting that a writer tell the truth or stop feigning modesty. The point, finally, is to get to something real, something excellent, something worth saying to somebody. In all his work, Elbow tries valiantly to see from
opposite directions, and so his explorations of voice always include a critique of essentialist positions. In his introductory essay to *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*, he explains that “The central question then for this kind of power in writing is not ‘How sincere are you?’ but ‘How much of yourself did you manage to get behind the words?’ . . . That is, the physical voice is more resonant when it can get more of the body resonating behind it or underneath it” (“About Voice” xxxvi). We had the sense that Elbow’s writing was full of physical images; when we went looking for them, we were astonished at how often—and how deliberately—Elbow uses the physical body as a metaphor to add resonance and weight to a voice he has crafted to reach more than one pitch.

In almost every one of his essays and books, Elbow tries to tease out the physicality of his writer’s voice and, as well, the physical transaction between writer and reader: “I want to read and study more about the human voice itself. It took me a long time to realize that if I’m interested in voice then covertly or implicitly I’m interested in importing the body into the realm of writing. The body is where the voice comes from. . . . At a totally intuitive level, I’m sure our writing will improve if we perform voice, if we move our bodies” (“An Interview” 28). “Voice is produced by the body. To talk about voice in writing is to import connotations of the body into the discussion—and by implication, to be interested in the role of the body in writing” (“About Voice” xxi).

Writing worth reading comes through just this combination, he seems to say, of sensibility and sense, body and mind, thought and feeling. “But if we learn to talk onto paper and exploit the speech-like quality possible in writing, we can have the experience of writing words with presence, and thereby learn what such writing feels like—in the fingers, in the mouth, and in the ear” (“Shifting Relationships” 299). In that combination, a writer finds power. We can’t help hearing echoes of Audre Lorde’s description of the erotic’s role in knowledge: “Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, ‘it feels right to me,’ acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. . . . The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (56). Lorde is trying to reclaim the body and felt sense in epistemology, to put women’s power back into systems of oppression; Elbow’s goals may be less political or radical, but in his connection of body to the acts of writing and reading, we see him exercising the uses of the erotic in ways that Lorde describes.

Elbow gets across his belief about connection convincingly, but not directly. In fact, his ideas about real voice sound tentative and speculative rather than definitive. “Real self. Real voice. I am on slippery ground here. There are layers and layers” (*WWP* 293). “Real voice” may be hard for Elbow to define directly,
but his readers get the point: the body—the self—is part of voice, and a necessary part if voice is to be real. Elbow helps us see the connection between the physical self and the writers’ voice by enacting it. His style, particularly the metaphors he chooses as he explores writers’ behavior, creates the argument for a way to find real voice by using the body. There may be no final definition for what’s “real” in voice, no discovery of an authentic self, no formula that explains sincerity, but there is something felt within it, something, as Lorde would say, erotic.

WRITING THE BODY

Elbow’s metaphors of writing and of elements in the writing process are embedded in all his texts, and they’re quite various. Especially in his earliest books, Writing Without Teachers and Writing With Power, he uses some fairly typical metaphors to describe what happens when a writer writes—writing as playing a game or making a journey or sculpting a piece of art. For example, “Consider the writing of a poem as the playing of a game, getting the ball through a hoop” (WWP 102). Or, “the open-ended writing process as a voyage in two stages: a sea voyage and a coming to new land” (WWP 50–51). But these analogies for writing and the writers’ role, images so comfortably familiar that they don’t even feel like metaphors to those of us used to reading about the writing process, are found rarely in Elbow’s texts, especially in his writing after Writing With Power. It’s as though he tries out the common comparisons and then abandons them in favor of others—more physical, more direct, and startling—that work better to convey Elbow’s insights about the relationship of writers to writing, writers to readers, teachers to students.

Other, more overtly physical metaphors are tried out in Writing With Power, but unlike the journey or the craft-making or the game, they’re retained. They appear over and over again in Embracing Contraries and in many of the essays Elbow has written since 1985. As he finds the metaphor and repeats it, he often plays with the implications of the comparison, spinning out the possibilities that come from letting the metaphor run its course. These are the metaphors of the body—of the erotic—that become his way to make meaning and his way to connect. Obviously these body metaphors are generative words for him, comparisons that provoke him to new thinking. Their use and repetition provoke readers too—to imagine him, the writer who chooses these images to explain himself as well as his ideas about writing. Lorde might say that these metaphors signal Elbow’s willingness to acknowledge that his work matters to him, personally, and his hope that writing will matter to his students and readers. She says that “The lack of concern for the erotic root and satisfactions of our work is felt in our dissatisfaction from so much of what we do” (55).
Readers sense Elbow’s pleasure in his exploration of the body as part of the writers’ presence. He concentrates especially, it seems, on the mouth, the skin, and the eyes, all sites of emotional, erotic, and physical satisfaction and tension. Taste, touch, and sight metaphors seem the most provocative for him, the most productive in terms of where the metaphorical image can take his discussion of writers and writing, and the most engaging for readers as they read him.

**EAT LIKE AN OWL**

“The owl pops down the whole mouse, trusting her innards to absorb what is nutritious and discard what is not” (*Embracing* 287). Of all Elbow’s sensory body metaphors, the most familiar to his readers is the one of hunger and all the related images of what a mouth can do—not only eat, but taste, touch, suck, spit, gag. Elbow is fascinated with the mouth, of course, since the descriptions of the mouth encoded in all the dozens of images he employs reveal the workings of the voice itself, the connection of speech to hunger, of breath to life, of voice to need.

His use of the mouth as a metaphor leads naturally to the emphasis on eating, on finding what’s nutritious for the body and using that sustenance to grow. Hunger, and the need to be satisfied, are maybe the most important—certainly the most recurrent—metaphors in all of Elbow’s writing. Writers and readers alike eat because they’re hungry. As they eat, both reader and writer take nourishment or risk illness, as Elbow configures the metaphor: “Or does the writer squeeze out so much of the juice of human communication, the oil of actual spoken discourse . . . that the language is indigestible?” (*WWP* 95). Even words that in other mouths would not even sound like metaphor, or would seem to be simply the faded metaphor of cliché are clearly a viable and productive comparison in Elbow’s work because he makes so much of the sensual metaphorical implications of eating: “If you want to digest and remember what you are reading, try writing about it instead of taking notes” (*WWP* 95). Or, “We must keep on reading it and try to digest its ideas. For our jobs and for our own needs” (*WWP* 344). In all his images of the rhetorical transaction between writer and reader, the compulsion of hunger and then the satisfaction of digestion are described as both pleasure and need, work and play, survival and luxury.

If the writing works, it’s tasty: “There is always a crunch in waiting” (*Embracing* 52). But it also requires at least a community of two: someone to feed and someone to eat. Elbow compares “nourishment that comes from having a real audience” (*WWP* 215) to what might happen when you’ve looked at your own work too long without an audience to help you out: “never do major revising when nauseated by your writing” (*WWP* 175). To describe a writer as
“nourished” by an audience seems to us a feminine metaphor, especially when read in the context of traditional definitions of rhetoric as agonistic, a duel, a war of wills. In Elbow’s image, readers feed writers as well as the reverse. The reader prevents nausea, in fact, as she gives the writer real nourishment. That audiences both feed and are fed by writers calls up an erotic “resource,” one that Lorde says has been “vilified, abused, and devalued within western society” (53).

Eating is also physical work: “Perhaps all the writing throughout the open-ended writing process hovers over the same territory. You are gnawing on a single tough bone” (WWP 55). Continual references to the physical act of consuming lead Elbow to acknowledge the primal nature of eating, the chemical and physical changes that accompany nourishment: “There is violence in learning. We cannot learn something without eating it, yet we cannot really learn it either without being chewed up” (Embracing 148). And, as elsewhere, Elbow dramatizes the oppositions inherent in metaphor: the doubled image of eating and being eaten, of digesting and spitting out.

Metaphors of writing as eating/survival also point to Elbow’s insistence that writers must have a compulsion, a need, to get it right—both to get it right in terms of subject matter and also to make it palatable, even delectable, to its readers: “Caring about quality implies a hunger to stamp out terrible writing. A hunger to destroy defects . . . hungering for excellence” (WWP 301). As usual, there is no one “right” way to put this meal on the table. Elbow speaks of “a hunger for coherence; yet a hunger also to be true to the natural incoherence of experience” (Embracing x). He urges on his readers “the realization that certainty is rarely if ever possible and that we increase the likelihood of getting things wrong if we succumb to the hunger for it” (Embracing 257). A more important hunger, even if it’s not more insistent, is the hunger for connection with an audience. Writers must admit, yield, to their hunger for community with readers. Echoing Lorde’s description of the way “unexpressed feeling” is a resource suppressed by Western culture, Elbow says wistfully, “We are held back from maturity and autonomy by a compulsive refusal to satisfy the less acceptable hunger for participation and merging” (Embracing 98).

Elbow is no innocent; he does not drop these mouth/eating/hunger/digestion metaphors into his descriptions of writers and readers without being fully aware of their connotations. In fact, he explores in some detail those “less acceptable” connotations of hunger, especially sexual hunger. He tells us that “My wife makes fun of me sometimes, saying, “The style of that book invites the reader in bed with you” (“An Interview” 18). No wonder, when in Embracing Contraries, he says, “To change metaphors . . . as writers you must say to your reader, ‘Why don’t you take off your clothes and let me play with your body?’”! (314). This last is perhaps the most overtly sexual metaphor
we’ve found in Elbow’s work, but throughout all his writing, he, more than any other teacher/theorist we know, dares to say what the rest of us might be thinking about the metaphorical possibilities inherent in the images he creates.

Here’s Elbow complicating the standard student-centered paradigm, for example: “It is clearly hostile to professors and professing: standing up there and putting yourself at the center of the stage, asking students . . . to ingest you or to fall in love with you” (Embracing 124). Here’s how he describes the pedagogical relationship: “Teaching is like a delicate human encounter, like love, like sex” (Embracing 120). He describes the relationship between teacher and student as “overtly sexual . . . . Teaching is sexual. What is uncertain is which practices are natural and which unnatural, which fruitful and which barren, which legal and illegal. . . . ” (Embracing 70). And he tells students of the dangerous and compelling power of teachers: “Or the falling in love model. . . . You want to know what he knows, feel what he feels, have the opinions he has. You probably adopt many of his mannerisms. Or hers. . . . Teacher as ‘role model’ though that term seems to be a pale defensive abstraction trying to guard against the emotional truth we sometimes actually feel: he or she is someone you want to eat or someone you want to eat you. To love and be loved” (Embracing 96).

It may be dangerous to desire this connection, to hunger, to feed, to digest. But like the owl, we need to eat—and we should eat it whole. “Babies begin by putting everything in their mouths. Thus when we doubt we sit out or fend off; when we believe we swallow or incorporate. . . .” (Embracing 263–64). We open our mouths, even when we fear it. “The idea of methodological belief . . . may arouse our natural fear of being invaded, polluted, or forced to swallow” (Embracing 265). Rescuing the faded metaphor of learning as simply “swallowing” what the teacher says, Elbow makes swallowing part of the necessary act of eating and being nourished, one natural consequence of opening the mouth.

This image of the mouth and all its metaphorical possibilities—blowing, sucking, eating, breathing—is especially generative for Elbow because it carries within it oppositional images. Metaphors are oppositions in themselves, as Elbow says. “Every metaphor is a force-fit, a mistake, a putting together of things that don’t normally or literally belong together” (WWP 79). With the images of the mouth, eating or taking in, come the images of regurgitating or spitting out. Both pleasure and danger, gluttony and survival are implicated in writers’ relationships with audiences, and teachers’ with students.

WRESTLING AS EMBRACE

Elbow seeks profound satisfaction in writing for his students as both writers and readers. Part of that satisfaction involves merging, especially in terms of feeling the skin or being inside the skin of another. “As though a single skin
lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings” (“About Voice” xxxvii). Or, “make sure you spend plenty of time with your mouth shut . . . Inside your reader’s skin” (WWP 269). “In the long run you get more out of taking a ride inside your reader’s skin than you get out . . . of your writing” (WWP 246). Complementing the focus on skin is the metaphor of the itch: “the force that drives this kind of learning is not the itch of a problem or contradiction but the itch for the person who is the teacher” (Embracing 96). Or “Unless there is a felt question—a tension, a palpable itch—the time remains unbound” (“Shifting Relationships” 296). Elbow uses the skin quite often as a metaphor for what separates and connects, as well as for what soothes and itches. His most powerful description of skin comes when he shows skin in contact, and the contact he chooses is wrestling.

Wrestling appears frequently in Elbow’s writing as a metaphor for what happens among teacher and student and education, between writer and reader, or between writer and the page. We were surprised by how often the images of wrestling, and the muscles it takes to wrestle well, appear in Elbow’s work. It’s a productive, and obvious, metaphor for the kinds of oppositions Elbow likes to set up as he considers how the interplay between two elements works. Again, as with metaphors of hunger and eating, both pleasure and work figure into Elbow’s conception of writing as muscular; so do the oppositions of power and surrender, exercise and relaxation.

Like hunger, too, muscles—stretching, contracting, vibration—are not neutral. They pull and push writers toward what they hunger for: “In the case of our physical muscles, we can exert ourselves only to contract them, not to loosen them. So in the case of our minds, our attaching muscle is usually stronger than our detaching one” (Embracing 268). In other words, writers want to believe in their developing texts, and Elbow invokes a muscular metaphor in order to argue that working the opposing muscle—doubt—is crucial: “But you don’t have to give into this dilemma of creativity versus critical thinking and submit to the dominance of one muscle and lose the benefits of the other . . . you can exploit these opposing muscles one at a time” (WWP 4).

Balance, however, is not easily negotiated or won. In fact, images of struggle, power, resistance, and force dominate Elbow’s own wrestling with the metaphor of writing as wrestling: “To write is to overcome a certain resistance: you are trying to wrestle a steer to the ground, to wrestle a snake into a bottle, to overcome a demon that sits in your head” (WWP 18); “you are straining to lift a heavy load of bricks onto your shoulder or struggling to carry something unwieldy across a stream” (WWP 194). And it can lead to unproductive thinking, what Elbow calls “non-cooking”: “There is only deadlock and stalemate. Two strong men arm wrestling: great energy expended, muscles bulging, sweat popping out
on the foreheads, but no movement” (Embracing 46–47). For Elbow, then, as usual, physical struggle can be both productive and nonproductive.

Writing isn’t merely the outcome of all this force. It’s also the training routine, the exercise that prepares the athlete for the race, the game, the contest: “Reading your words out loud is push-ups for the specific muscle used in taking responsibility for your words” (WWP 23). Elbow’s exercise metaphors might in some ways account for his critics’ beliefs that writers write only to “express themselves,” when in fact what Elbow’s recommending is a regular workout, in private, before a writer “shows herself” in public: “twisting and stretching what you are trying to write about by mapping it against a variety of terrains” (WWP 80). It’s important, he says, to “manage this flowering . . . gradually teach the stiff cells of our bodies to vibrate and be flexible” (WWP 282).

Unlike advice that cautions writers to hide the traces of the private messy process of composing in the public performance, Elbow shows himself in the training room as well as in the arena. And he makes both spaces concrete and physical, containing actual bodies with muscles, cells, and organs tuned to the act of communication. This intimate, physical presence is both powerful and problematic in a profession that at once understands and values the personal location and mistrusts its use in scholarship.

Amid the force of the wrestling and workout imagery are also images of surrender, the importance of letting the wrestling stop, the muscles relax. Akin to the hunger metaphors, where writers and readers both prepare food and accept nourishment, Elbow tells students that they must also “have the courage to stop wrestling with the foe and give gifts to allies” (WWP 190). Muscles must relax as well as contract, and Elbow often insists that extension is as useful as contraction. In advising students to explore all ideas, even those that seem opposite to a developing argument or point of view, he says, “Surely the danger is not so much that false beliefs will defile us if we try them on like garments—as though the muscles in our minds will somehow be made permanently labile” (Embracing 282). As always in Elbow’s thinking, the whole contains the opposing parts; force includes surrender, exercise includes ease, and wrestling also involves the embrace.

Teachers wrestle as well as writers and also must engage in this dance of power and surrender. Elbow often advises teachers to become more passive in the classroom, letting go in order to take stock: “The class finds a new and stabler center of gravity. And I discover a mental or emotional muscle I’ve always been clenching to keep the ship from sinking . . . by feeling all of a sudden how tired it is” (Embracing 72). At other times, teachers must wrestle with students, and students must exert their own force. “Wrestling seems inevitable to me because of the inherent paradox of authority in learning and teaching: students
seldom learn well unless they give in . . . they resist or even reject their teachers” (Embracing 65). In fact, good pedagogy demands a power struggle: “With that good teacher . . . we feel we can go for broke, wrestle full out” (WWP 217). Or if they don’t wrestle, they box: “Students only dare get in the ring with their teachers because they know the teachers will pull their punches” (WWP 224).

Wrestling, stretching, exercising are productive metaphors for Elbow because of the doubting and believing, resisting and acceding, giving out and taking in that such images call up for Elbow’s readers, reminding them of the tension between opposing forces that results in interaction, dialogue, communion. For Elbow, the metaphor of wrestling is much more about the physical straining, pushing, pulling, exerting, and surrendering than it is about declaring a winner, about defeat or victory, vanquished and conqueror. Lorde tells us that the erotic functions not as contest but as sharing: it is the “power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another” (56). Although wrestling is a metaphor that is gendered male, the way Elbow uses it to produce a new relationship rather than a winner or a loser transforms the metaphor into something more like a dance than a fight.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

As we re-read Elbow, looking deliberately for bodily images, it seems to us that his most productive metaphor for getting across his ideas about writers and writing and for showing himself to his audience is sight. As with the image of “digesting” or “swallowing” information in school, or the image of learning as struggle and contest, Elbow reclaims an old metaphor and energizes it with new contexts: “Vision is a paradigm for belief—‘seeing is believing.’ Just as we mistakenly feel helpless about what we believe, so too with what we see” (Embracing 272). For Elbow, vision is not passive, but active, again a kind of wrestling, or even eating; in any case, seeing is not just believing, but also acting: “A belief is a lens and one of the best ways to test it is to look through it” (Embracing 283).

Elbow also makes sight an active sense by, of course, describing vision as doubled, focused in two directions at once: “You have used two kinds of consciousness: immersion, where you have had your head down and are scurrying along a trail of words in the underbrush; and perspective, where you . . . get a sense of shape and outline” (WWP 52). Moreover, sometimes it’s useful for writers to surrender their clear vision, to lose sight of their goals: “If you want to end up with new insights, you have to allow yourself to lose sight of your topic during much of the voyage out” (WWP 75). Or, writers must use both eyes in order to see the complicated whole of their texts as it’s developing: “Nevertheless we feel it’s possible to have a bit of detachment with our left eye
as it were—a certain part of one’s mind that flies up to the seventh sphere with Troilus and sees, ‘Ah yes, I’m really taking a strong position here—and I’ve got a big personal stake in this’” (“Academic Discourse” 142).

Despite all the ways that Elbow’s writing is infused with images of the physical body, he does not often refer to his own body, except when he’s talking about sight. With this metaphor, Elbow quite often uses his own eyes, his impaired vision, to illustrate and explore writers’ dilemmas with topics and readers: “I often find myself involuntarily closing my eyes as I speak. I realize now that this behavior is an instinctive attempt to blot our awareness of audience when I need all my concentration for just trying to figure out or express what I want to say” (“Closing My Eyes” 50). (In fact, this habit of speaking with his eyes closed was the physical trait that most struck us when we finally found out what Peter Elbow looked like, at 4C’s in 1984.)

The idea that closing the eyes—becoming for the moment blind—allowing for better “sight” has been a productive paradox for writers since Oedipus. Elbow’s instructions for describing a person, for example, end with this suggestion: “Close your eyes and see______’s face as clearly and vividly as you can” (Embracing 37). But his fear of blindness—of never being able to see—is part of Elbow’s sight metaphor as well: “I can’t seem to make myself write well anymore,” he reports from a journal entry describing his use of free writing. “If I just write flabby, mushy, soupy, I’ll go blind and insane if I indulge myself in this easiness” ( Embracing 51). Still, even in this moment of doubt, Elbow understands the advantages of finding your way in the dark: “Is it really true? I think I’m able to do more complicated things now—work at a higher level.” (Embracing 52). This higher level—excellence in writing—may come, then, from groping along as well as from scanning deliberately.

For one accused of writing merely the personal, there are few autobiographically personal details, like the journal entry, in Elbow’s work. Here’s another exception: “My brain is accustomed to accepting conflicting data.... I started out cross-eyed and childhood surgery left me with two good eyes which happen to look outward in different directions” (Embracing 233). This revelation is more than just a biographical detail. Elbow uses his own physicality to express an argument: the mind needs to be able to handle conflicting data, to use data that doesn’t easily mesh. As in his other bodily metaphors, sight carries oppositional tension; this metaphor holds the double perspective of seeing and of being seen. Writers must understand that not only their vision but their readers’ as well completes the rhetorical transaction. “When we speak, listeners don’t just see our words, they see us—how we hold and move ourselves” (“Shifting Relationships” 286). Being seen carries with it a connotation of exposure and also the sometimes painful possibility of judgment. “For
none of us can function at our best unless we are seen as smart by ourselves and others. One of the many reasons why smart students function well is that they are seen as smart” (Embracing xiv). Elbow emphasizes the metaphorical quality of the word by italicizing it, as though he’s reminding his readers that he’s talking about actual eyes looking for signs that signal “smart.”

This metaphor of “seeing” each other, as well as oneself, exposing and being exposed, with nuanced attention to how bodies move and how both writers and audiences “hold” each other, infuses all of Elbow’s writing and, we would argue, embodies Lorde’s conception of the “uses of the erotic.” Lorde insists that the erotic is not merely feeling, but the use we make of feeling: “To share the power of each other’s feelings is different from using another’s feelings as we would a Kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us” (59). Reading Peter Elbow, we get the definite feeling that he writes not only out of his own experience—his own wrestling with his writing—but that he writes always something that’s actually on his mind, something he deeply cares about and struggles with. With Elbow, you don’t get a presentation with a canned response programmed in, but a conversation, a search that deliberately includes not only Elbow’s experiences, but ours.

Lorde also asks us to remember that the erotic is connected not only to depth of feeling, to satisfaction, but also to the striving for satisfaction, for excellence: “The erotic . . . is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. . . . For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. . . . Within the celebration of the erotic, my work becomes a conscious decision—a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered” (54–55). Elbow’s bodily metaphors not only call up the erotic to his readers in a physical sense, reminding us of the bodily act of writing and connecting with other people; in all his work, Elbow has attempted to lead students to this sense of satisfaction with writing—the work of having wrestled, fed—and to the joy of being seen in the process of that striving.

Peter Elbow is thin and tall, a little stooped. He wears tweed jackets and turtlenecks. He has a wide, generous smile. He doesn’t wear glasses, but one of his eyes focuses by indirection—looks at you sideways so as to see you straight on. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have tried to write to so many different people,” he says. But that was the point all along. He comes at it sideways, letting the metaphor do its work, letting his audience of “many different people” find a way to embody his voice and their own.