

Occasional Papers on the Essay: Practice & Form

REDEFINING THE EXPERIMENT

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Kim Dana Kupperman
Kathryn Nuernberger
Traci O'Connor
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Introduction

Steven Coughlin and Kathryn Nuernberger

Ezra Pound's admonition to "make it new" is nearly a century old. The prose poem has been with us for more than one hundred years, language poetry is settling into its middle age, even flash fiction and the lyric essay are comfortably familiar; yet these modes dominate our conversations about experiments in literature. We find ourselves in the paradoxical position where radical experimentation has become a predictable norm. Moreover, in recent years the term *experimental* has been used to describe an increasingly specific range of familiar and canonical forms that emphasize language over narrative and fragmentation over linearity.

So we asked writers (some who consider their work experimental and some who do not): Are there are other ways to define experimental writing? What new forms or variations will the next generation of writing bring? Where do we go from here? Their reflections follow.

h/experiment (a manifessay)

Kim Dana Kupperman

Every time I hear the word hybrid, it makes me want to reach for my revolver.

—Mark Halliday

h/

Reach for your revolver. I've got mine. Let's play Shoot Out at the OK Corral. I mean, if we really are going generic, we might as well go Western. What god-fearing, never-learned-the-truth-about-cowboys-and-Indians American kid doesn't want to be a tough player in a small dusty town, vanquishing the old standard of Bad with some clean, good-guy guns?

Now we've shot white space into the essay. In those shoot-'em-up holes are harbors, hearing losses, heartbeats, heliotropes. Hexes.

Put a spell on the essay, hybridize. Be the outlaw you always wanted to be. Forget the rules.

One man's rigidity is another woman's hybridity.

e

Embedded in the essay is the peril of the experiment, the excitation of essaying a hypothesis, the exhilaration of slipping on a new disguise. Take the path less traveled, enter the associative exquisitions that reach the Point of Discovery, the what-you-didn't-know-you-knew ending. Allow the mind to map its own travel, and give the essayer the foolhardy courage to follow it and explicate the biography of a thought.

x

Exit the rules. As an adolescent, I loved the five-paragraph essay—its Roman-numeral sentinels standing watch at the three gates of Introduction, Body (complete with its own narrative arc of A, B, and C), and Conclusion. But now we leave that place of extreme order.

There is no exit from the experimental; it is experiential to the point of existential, exponential to the exhaustion of exegesis, an exaggerated exclamation, an exonerated exhortation. Excalibur. Pull thy sword from the stone and cut out the dross. Separate the wheat from the chaff.

X marks the spot. That's all you really need to know.

p

Playful personae
perform past the perfumed
progress of poetry.

Prose in verse; verse in prose. The patter of little punctuation feet punctually paring the *s/pace*.

Science, that demon, that friend, has shown that playfulness is a sign of intelligence in animals. Which means that the essay—playing music with language, History against Memory, Fiction against Truth, type against space, silence against sound, Life with Art—is most positively intelligent.

e

The essay = repository for the world's inexhaustible et cetera.

r

Repossess, replay, and re-vision:

The Past
Memory
The Line/Sentence
The Stanza/Paragraph
White Space
Thesis

When the essay goes lyric, it rehearses. Meaning it repeats. And it rehearses. Meaning it reiterates as a hearse, which is not only that dark long car carrying the casket of Conventionality, but also “an elaborate framework erected over a coffin or tomb to which memorial verses or epitaphs are attached.”

i

As Sharon Olds advised, “Take the I Out.” On a date. On an excursion. On a trip down Memory Lane. Out back. Into the night. To the movies.

To the theater. On a walk. To the grocery store. To the waiting room. To the stationers. To the white cliffs. To Tinker Creek. To Spillville. To Antietam. To Jerusalem. To the heart's lonely hunter. To see a mockingbird. To forgetfulness. To anywhere it wants to roam.

Be itinerant, incidental, irresistible.

m

Meander abroad and at home. Meditate on a stone that talks, a walk in the woods, faith in a seed. Muse upon the price of eggs, the reasons for war, the endlessness of inanity. Mirror a mercy. Make manifest the choice to attempt understanding. Measure for measure. Meddle in a mirage until clarity materializes. Mind your maybes. Murder your darlings.

And, as McClanahan says, "Make a messay!"

e

Envision a world where the essay is as important as love or intrigue or war and we'd go, at evening time, to see films with titles such as:

Essaying in the Rain

The Essay That Knew Too Much

The Essay around the Corner

The Thin Red Essay

Twelve Angry Essays

n

Never forget the new. Or the importance of the news. Or that there is nothing new under the sun. Or that *note* is *not* with an *e* on the end.

And can we *please* dispense with the term *nonfiction*?

t

Trick or treat? Truth or tall tale? Tease out the tension of this tedious quandary by talking about something else, tornadoes, perhaps, or toenail polish, the real cost of teak, or tattlers.

Question: "Truth or dare?"

Answer: "Trial by essay."

Lyric Intoxication: A Call For Ecstatic Reading

Kathryn Nuernberger

To have great poets, there must be great audiences.

—Walt Whitman

A few years ago John Barr called in the pages of *Poetry* for a new “American Poetry in a New Century.” This call formalized a growing body of anecdotal laments that contemporary poetry is an art without an audience, a form without content. According to Barr, “Contemporary poetry’s striking absence from the public dialogues of our day, from the high school classroom, from bookstores, and from mainstream media is evidence of a people in whose mind poetry is missing and unmissed.” Barr goes on to suggest that it is the poets, filling the journals with their sub-par, redundant work, and the academy with their annoyingly incessant pursuit of Masters degrees in the craft, who are to blame for “poetry that is neither robust, resonant, nor... entertaining.” He particularly targets the lyric poem, whose ubiquitous presence as the dominant mode in contemporary poetry is another sign of the creative poverty that extends the chasm between author and audience. Barr admits that he himself does not know how “to rouse an entire art form out of a bad mood,” but suggests poets have placed undue emphasis on merely paying attention, at the expense of documenting lived experiences that might connect with a more general public.

While this kind of urgent rhetoric expressing a need to press art and language forward is a necessary incitement to creation, perhaps the solution to poetry’s present “crisis” of a disengaged and dwindling audience is not so much a new mode of writing as a new attitude toward reading. Perhaps accusations of austerity, elitism, and stale insularity more accurately describe readers like Barr, who are desperately in need of what Nietzsche called frenzy and Baudelaire termed intoxication. The answer is not less lyricism from the poets, but more participation from the reading public. The answer is that we need a Dionysian cult of lyric ecstasy. That’s right, a Dionysian cult of lyric ecstasy. Does that sound elitist? Needless academic? Ecstatically over-eager? Is it absurd to suggest that readers engage with poetry on emotional and intellectual

levels that require capitalization and allusions to nineteenth-century philosophy? Of course such engagement is absurd, but it is this kind of absurdity that can genuinely rouse readers from the bad mood bringing our poetry down.

As one of the editors at the literary journal *Quarter After Eight*, I find myself thinking often not only about what I want from the writers in our journal, but what I want from the readers of our journal. It seems natural to many to insist that writers adapt to the reading public, and while there is, of course, merit in such efforts, I think, by and large, editors and critics ask too little of these readers. As absurdly idealistic as it sounds, by reading in pursuit of lyric intoxication the public will find an entire world of robust, resonant, and entertaining literature already made available by small presses and journals and anxiously awaiting readers.

What does lyric intoxication require of the reader? Participation. The lyrically intoxicated reader doesn't read to escape this world, but reads to enter into it more deeply. When faced with an elliptical text, the intoxicated reader allows the language of the piece to trigger her own meditative reflections and subconscious associations. The ellipses in the text are filled in through the reader's own participation, and thus the reader does not escape into the piece, but becomes a co-creator. For example, in *Quarter After Eight*, volume sixteen, we published a series of erasures by Mary Ruefle. In "The Serpent," Mary Ruefle takes a page from a junk-store novel and whites out long passages of text in much the same way that a drop of water would have eaten the ink off ancient paper. A long paragraph is reduced to:

The Serpent
] knitting [
 the [] house,
] which at first had no meaning?

I read "The Serpent" and I think of Eve the waif in Renaissance paintings, hand draped over her nudity like so many of my Catholic school classmates in the locker room, nervous stomach and shaking legs awaiting my turn in the confessional, I think of a certain boy's infernal hair. I read "the serpent knitting" and remember the black snake sunning himself on the garden path as I took my first walk after giving birth, how I jumped and held the baby more tightly to my chest. I read "the house" set apart on this blotted-out rag of an old page and remember the neighborhood of old Victorians where I grew up, the

groan of staircases, dust draping itself languorously across the chair rail. I read “which at first had no meaning?” and can only hear the question mark at the end of the line. I think again of my childhood home. I try to hear the more optimistic “at first.” I try again.

Though the narrative context for this poem has been obliterated, the missing pieces serve to highlight the sense of alienation and trepidatious hope the remaining text expresses. Those notes ringing across the silent, snow-covered page echo the loneliness of a house that “had no meaning” and remind the reader how precious a few bits of authentic expression can be, given how much of what we think and desire ends up in serpentine knots of confusion.

Or consider Eleanor Stanford’s “Itapua: Footnotes,” which appears in volume eighteen of *Quarter After Eight*. Again the narrative is excised and we are left with enigmatic fragments that invite readers to build their own narratives. Perhaps it is one of kidnapping, or the lost explorer, or the guilt-ridden and penitent bourgeois vacationer.

Itapua: Footnotes

1 The coconut vendor with his machete and his dirty rag.
Amiga, he calls me.

2 The surfers know the invisible rocks beneath the water.

3 In the interior, the doors to the houses are always open.

4 The men play a game with little stones: drop one in each smooth indentation.

5 Meningitis. Dengue. The voice on the line that says, we have your son.

6 The future subjunctive: *Se Deus quiser*.

7 In the middle of the road there was a stone.

8 a terrible necessity

9 small, red-orange fruit, firm-fleshed, acidic.

10 In the year 1500, Cabral found himself, quite by accident, in Brazil.

11 There was a stone in the middle of the road.

12 Believing the newly-discovered land to be an island he gave it the name of Island of the True Cross and took possession of it.

13 One spits out the large stone.

14 It’s a stick, it’s a stone, it’s the end of the road...

Some readers will not be “entertained” by this openness; the poem adamantly refuses to sweep them away. There are so many possible worlds to enter and you must choose your own rock in the road, your

own terrible necessity, your own path to the interior. In a lyric poem, the particular narrative the reader gleans is not so important as that she is able to enter the emotional ambience of the poem, to feel an emotional complexity orchestrated by the poet through the combination of text and ellipses. In the case of “Itapua: Footnotes” I would suggest that emotional ambience might be characterized as a harmony of an outsider’s fear, victimization by and of outsiders and insiders, a turning to faith, reaching toward forgiveness and redemption.

Lyric intoxication is not only a source of pleasure, if not entertainment, it is an avenue for the reading public to resist participation in the twenty-first century’s entertainment industrial complex. More than fifty years ago, in their remarkably prescient essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer suggested the culture industry—the market that generates and profits from popular culture—has, with typical capitalist appetite, devoured virtually all forms of artistic expression. By convincing the consumer that all art should be entertainment as well, a tyranny has emerged that leaves the body free, but attacks the soul, with the result that all soulful expression smacks of the hegemonic system. Even efforts to resist such a system still require submission to “purposelessness for the purposes declared by the market.” This destructive and virtually inescapable vice grip that industrial society imposes on individuals is not only an underlying assumption driving Barr’s critique, but one he explicitly exalts, drawing on his own ethos as a career man from Wall Street. “The human mind,” he writes, “is a marketplace, especially when it comes to selecting one’s entertainment.” He goes on to call for writing that engages with this marketplace:

Movies, novels, popular songs: the best of this entertainment survives because it has art. We are drawn back to it because it tells us about our lives; we are instructed as we are pleased. Poetry, coming from the other direction, must meet a standard of pleasure as well as profundity if it is to recover its place in American culture. Poetry needs to find its public again, and address it.

At first glance this message seems to ring with an egalitarian spirit, but—as Adorno and Horkheimer suggest—such compromises become “the refuge of a mindless artistry” that “loses sight of any goal and is little more than a magic lantern show for those with their backs to reality.” Adorno and Horkheimer excoriate the culture industry for its efforts to unite personal desire with public performance, lamenting that such

an endeavor can only turn the human being into “a proficient apparatus, similar (even in emotions) to the model served up by the culture industry. The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific to themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion.” They saw the early stages of a system that would pressure all artists to turn their art to commodity, and reduce genuine expression to pure entertainment.

In the essay, “Publics and Counterpublics,” Michael Warner offers further insight into why lyric poetry’s intoxicating effect would be obliterated by the seemingly reasonable activity of reaching out to a wider audience with the intent to please. Unlike so much entertainment, lyric poetry requires at least the illusion that it has no audience. In the words of John Stuart Mill: “Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude.” The lyric thrives on the illusion that it is private speech, because such privacy allows the reader to identify intimately with the content of the poem in a way an expressly public address would prohibit. This may even be why so many readers of poetry are also writers of poetry. Barr claims, “Lacking a general audience, poets still write for one another.” Rather, it is that the lyric poem so affects its true audience, the intoxicated reader, that the audience is compelled to respond in kind. Unlike other verse forms, whose obvious artifice allows for a veneer of verisimilitude that the audience can become lost in, the lyric requires constant critical engagement on the part of the reader. To seek out and speak directly to an audience would deprive lyric poetry of its beneficial, narcotic qualities, which are the qualities the present age is in need of most. Moreover, fixation on an aesthetic and moral good in art distracts the reader from a richer experience, that of the sublime. No longer satisfied with Yeats’s edict that “a poem should click shut like a well made box,” contemporary poetry strives to push verse open to the limit of comprehensibility and beyond. The poetic project now is to imagine a language that is not bound by the sociohistorical position of the poem’s author, but one that reveals the writer and reader’s participation in the entertainment industrial complex and signals a reality beyond such semantic limitations.

A century and a half ago Nietzsche challenged readers to consider a World Will, a noumenal realm beyond the world of appearances. Access to such awareness required an excess of frenzy, a state of ecstatic intoxication he termed variously as “drunkenness,” “a horrible witches’ brew of sensuality,” and “wanton abandon.” This Nietzschean endorphin rush offers a release from the suffering endemic to

participation in civilization, and lyric poetry provided one of the few mechanisms for such a transcendent state because of its capacity to push the enthralled outside the stifling linguistic limitations of laws and mores. According to David Allison:

The lyric poet effectively create[s] a musical mood in his audience, inducing an emotional or affective disposition that [is] so all- pervasive in its intensity and generality that the poet and his audience become intoxicated, dispossessed.

The sense that lyric poetry is irrelevant under the present capitalist, imperial system is not an illusion, but an intentional and gratifying effect of an art form that rises out of a feeling of dispossession from the limitations of civilization's hegemonic logic.

The form such a frenzied, ecstatic reading of lyric poetry might take is likely to be as much an individuated experience of private sublime as the writing of the lyric is; however, Joe Bonomo's lyric essay "Prismatica" from *Quarter After Eight*, volume 17 is one example that might be used to baptize the willing reader into the cult of Dionysian reading.

Bonomo writes about a simple memory:

I'm standing near the swing set during recess at Saint Andrew the Apostle School. N. is on the swings. She pumps her legs and grips the chain and leans back in the wind and her hair streams and she swings upward and her plaid skirt lifts and I see her sky-blue underwear.

He then goes on to "read" this memory in a state of lyric intoxication, allowing the initial moment to serve as a catalyst for contemplation of himself, his society, the '70s, and much more. He spirals back to the memory:

Aerial view of a blacktop playground in suburban Washington DC. Children scatter and join, shriek and jaw, huddle and separate. The politics of groups. Girls on a swing. A boy by a flagpole.

He spirals back again: "Apple Computer is incorporated. Gary Gilmore is executed by firing squads in Utah. Roots. EMI drops the Sex Pistols." He comes back again: "I had a crush on N." And again: "Will it be made to matter." And again: "What do I know? I am essaying an upskirt from decades ago."

By operating as a writer and a reader, Bonomo is not looking to entertain us with N.'s blue underpants. Rather, he is looking for openings in that memory to grip the imagination and compel the reader

to respond by participating in the determination of what the words, both those given and unwritten, might mean.

It seems Barr is inclined to dismiss this kind of linguistic experiment as one more unfortunate consequence of MFA programs' proliferation of cerebral self-aggrandizement, but literature that offers a mere textual experience can no longer be produced in good faith. Adorno and Horkheimer have shown that the gloss of entertainment is not some spoonful of sugar, but a poison that fundamentally alters the character of art, rendering it one more product to be consumed. The action-packed epic, the iambic drama, the didactic epigram—these forms have been rendered suspect. Lyric subjectivity is a necessary component of art that wishes to resist becoming a product of the entertainment industry. In this age, art that seeks to do more than entertain requires the participation of its audience in the creation of its meaning. While provocateurs like Barr are useful in so far as the thrown gauntlet incites creativity, it is high time audiences were challenged to match the abundant and exuberant production by contemporary writers with ecstatic reception. Writers aren't the only ones who will benefit.

We Who Have Completely Learned from Seeing at What We are Looking

Traci O'Connor

So here we are. We found our way to DC. We walked into the conference this morning, wiped our shoes on the floor mat, checked our files with our left hands while shaking someone else's hand with our right. We stood in line for an AWP badge, we did not cut, we held a door open for someone else to walk through, we said "thank you," hugged someone, kissed someone else on the cheek, and sat politely, facing the appropriate direction.

But there's not an AWP booklet for appropriate conference behavior, we're not genetically designed to hold doors open, and none of this is in the Bible, so how do we know to do these sorts of things?

It's because of culture. Culture is the way we organize ourselves in the world. It's all of those things that bind us together—shared languages, shared beliefs, shared values, folklores, myths, jokes, songs, our holidays, the way we dress, the things we do. We have religious cultures, ethnic cultures, generational cultures, soccer hooligans, the Steeler Nation.

But, as so many of you already know, and probably teach in one form or another in your classes, as culture binds us together, making us secure in our shared identity, giving us meaning and direction, shaping our ideals, values, morals, and beliefs, it also—as the editors of a famous first-year writing textbook suggest—selectively blinds us. As we unconsciously act and speak and do within the context of our cultures, we also, without intention or thought, exclude other ways of acting, speaking, doing, and thinking. Our acculturation as human beings is a powerful force, enacted upon us from the moment we draw breath and are buttoned into pink glitterclouds of ruffles, the satiny bodice with a picture of a cupcake being flown delicately across a rainbow on the dainty wings of a unicorn princess; or, conversely, we're buckled into a set of blue overalls with asphalt shingled patches and a dinosaur smacking a homerun with a baseball bat made of guns.

The power of culture is to totalize, make complete, secure boundaries. It constructs and then reinforces, reifies its own construction so completely that, within it, we forget to notice or remember that any of it is a construction at all.

It's like this (and with thanks to David Foster Wallace):

There are two fish swimming along and they meet another fish swimming in the opposite direction who nods and says, "Morning boys, How's the water?" The two young fish swim on for a bit and then one of them looks over at the other and says, "What the hell is water?"¹

I'd like to propose that we have a culture of creative writing, which binds us together even as it selectively blinds us.

Raymond Federman, in an essay titled "What are Experimental Novels and Why Are There So Many Left Unread?," explores the notion of what it means to be experimental through the idea of "readability." *Readability*, he writes, "is what is clear, easy, legible, pleasing, interesting; in other words, what reassures us in a text of what we already know, what comforts us because we easily and pleasurably recognize the world (at a glance) and ourselves in the world (at another glance) in what we read."²

If we think of our world as the culture of creative writing, we can see the many "realities" of our culture, the systems of value, the modes of teaching, the theory, the literature, the mushpot experience we recognize as "the workshop," say, the condescending Harry Potter eye roll, the thrill of a few inscrutable words from an editor we don't know but will casually creep on in the book fair written in ink on a crooked rejection slip, a reading in a gallery with wine in plastic cups and napkins full of hummus and pita chips.

Readability as a mode of recognition, as a binding and defining quality of our creative culture, is conspicuously undefined. All of us, as participants in the culture of creative writing have a sense of conventional work, an intuition, a familiarity with what has become so standard, so engrained in our creative writing world that we can't even see it as a product of our own construction. What exactly makes work conventional? And why this definition over any number of other possibilities? Who is the God of such things? The omniscient locus of creative manufacture? Where is the legal team in vintage polyester suits making the binding contracts? The *New York Times Book Review*, apparently, or *Publishers Weekly*, the National Book Award, or any of the overwhelming number of (and increasingly more expensive) contests and prizes that value and legitimize some writing while ignoring, and effectively silencing, others. Or maybe it's all of us sitting around a conference table collectively deciding what works and what doesn't.

This is the water we swim in, ubiquitous, so familiar to us that maybe we've ceased to notice it at all.

Unreadability, then is the work that we don't recognize that forces us to break from our identity, puts us into crisis.

This is why so much of the writing we call "experimental" really isn't. Rather, it's another form of readable writing that exists and has meaning only in relationship to its binary: "conventional." In this way, both experimental and conventional, as adjectives, as defining (and thus limiting) terms, are just two incarnations of the same damn thing: readability, recognition, a familiarity that we confuse for merit, maybe even art. The work we've categorized as experimental doesn't compel itself to crisis, it's just the hipster version of the workshoppable, award-winnable, publishable work that keeps all of us in this system secure and in control of our identities as creative writers.

So what is it to be in crisis? I think about this, pour myself a glass of wine. I think of Duchamp with his ready-mades, his saucy little LHRRQ, his identity in drag, his urinal denied a salon wall. And then I think of Picasso, which leads me, of course, to think of Gertrude Stein.

So I do some academic research. I Google the terms *Gertrude Stein* and *experimental*. Thousands of hits: recent essays, articles, and books all defining her work as experimental. But with more exhaustive study, using the "books" feature to enhance my Google search, I discover something compelling: though the depth of my research and my dedication to it last as long as my second glass of Shiraz and so, for more than one reason, are most likely inconclusive, it seems that Gertrude Stein, herself, did not think of her writing as *experimental*, but rather as an *experiment*, as in "I'm experimenting with automatic writing."

This subtle but critical difference is at the beating heart of this discussion. One word, *experimental*, an adjective that defines and limits even as it legitimizes and reifies its opposite. And the other word, *experimenting*, a verb: a process, a doing or an undoing, an experience, a being, a discovering, and let's face it, quite often a failing.

I think of it in terms of the physical sciences, which honestly I know nothing about, but still the metaphor seems pretty good, and this is a writing conference so the chances that anyone will argue with me are slim—but an experiment is a process, something you perform in a lab, and once finished, it becomes a result. The experiment is only in the doing, the trying, the not being sure about what's going to happen. It's in the messes you're making, the explosions, the living cultures foaming in the petri dish. The experiment is what you propel into motion and then watch to see what you get.

In many ways the culture of creative writing is a controlled environment. We read and teach from the expected creative writing guides, we listen to familiar lectures in familiar rooms about familiar ways to craft, we sit in circles or around conference tables reading stories and poems we know how to “fix,” read journals not so different from one another (all of this reductive, I know, but representative ideas anyway); it seems a logical conclusion that, in this environment, we’ll get similar kinds of results, over and over again. Perhaps we are enchanted, or made secure, by the appearance of experimentation, when, really, the hypothesis and the results are a foregone conclusion. We see exactly what we’ve set up to see.

Not Picasso. Gertrude Stein writes: “When he was nineteen years old, Picasso came to Paris into a world of painters who had completely learned everything they could from seeing at what they were looking.”³ The emphasis in this idea is on “at,” which thrills me as it suggests this kind of artificial control I’m talking about. Think about a world of painters, or writers, who have completely learned everything from seeing at what they are looking...which means they’re not looking in other directions. This controlled and deliberate gaze equals a blindness to other things.

From Seurat to Courbet they were all of them looking with their eyes and Seurat’s eyes then began to tremble at what his eyes were seeing, he commenced to doubt if in looking he could see. Matisse too began to doubt what his eyes could see.

The possibility of this doubt—this is the fissure, the crack, the break in the system from which the experiment of Picasso’s work emerged.

Because of this, a community of artists who began to doubt that what they were looking at was enough, who began to question the possibility of their own blindness, “was a world ready for Picasso who had in him not only all Spanish painting but Spanish cubism which is the daily life of Spain.”

And Picasso was an artist who emptied himself out. He had his cubism within him—living what was his art, pouring himself onto the canvas; he didn’t learn such things from a textbook, or at a conference, he didn’t see the way others were completely seeing.

His work was in the doing, as was Gertrude Stein’s. Her egotism was not in the reflection of it in the mirror of the world outside her—not in the definitions given to it by reviewers, editors, professors or workshop peers. A writer, a serious writer, she writes, conceives of herself as existing by and in herself, not in the reflection of her books, to write

she must first of all exist in herself... and honestly, if we are—all of us—trained, comfortable, familiarized in this culture of creative writing, can we really be sure of our individual identities, our egos, as writers and artists?

Now Gertrude Stein's writing is called "experimental"—pinned like a bug to a corkboard, named, catalogued. Then, writing was *experimenting*—a kind of dreaming, maybe, trying something, waiting to see what happens.

There's a recent VIDA post about the overwhelming number of male vs. female writers published in several of our country's most respected sources,⁴ which suggests one of the negative impacts, the insidious results, of the cultural blindness that we all create, reinforce, and privilege without realizing that we do—still, it's not a blame game but a powerful cultural force imposing its values and limiting our choices without our awareness of it. In any culture, our language, our values, our beliefs, our ethics, morals, etcetera, create structures of power and respect—binary systems that define and limit. It's hard to avoid, and even if we don't like to admit it, we've all acted blindly in the world because of them. So it's almost obvious as we develop a culture of creative writing that such binaries would rear up and we would find ourselves defining our own work or the work of others as male or female, literary or genre, MFA or New York, conventional or experimental.

Ultimately, my search for experiment coalesces around the big and inexact idea that the relatively new phenomenon of the creative writing program along with its systems of assessments, both institutional and as they arise from within the culture (and I mean the language of our collective aesthetic, editorial decisions, prizes, craft books with directives that seem to be growing increasingly similar, converging into a common point on the horizon) might be—as an unintentional if unavoidable side effect—not only corraling writing into organized and recognizable camps, but, more importantly—in its cultural system, which, as with any culture, develops around and within us whether we intend it or not and, as with any cultural system, normalizes and privileges some beliefs, values, and practices even as it devalues or perhaps—negates even the possibility of others, *whether or not we see or even acknowledge the possibility*. It's a kind of glass bead game, in which the rules seem necessary and important, all of us earnest and passionate as we sit down to play. But, unaware of the game's limitations to begin with—the missing choices, all of the possibilities for writing as art that we'll never have the chance to recognize or experiment with—the things we haven't yet

thought of, all the things we'll never think of precisely because we don't see the limits imposed by our culture and, often, refuse to acknowledge even the possibility that these lacks exist. It's the nature of identity, a desire for wholeness, for security, for meaning so powerful it fundamentally directs us in the directions least likely to alienate us from ourselves, when what the real experiment of art demands is exactly this fracture, this friction. In this crisis is art's be-ing-ness; this discomfoting non-recognition, which more often seamlessly becomes negation, creates the kind of heat necessary for the real experiment; the experience of unreadability, a loss of control, the willingness to be adrift, the feeling of drowning, but in water shot through with spinning, purple light.

Bukowski used to say that if you want to write, you need to "get the hell out of the classroom," which we might take either literally, abandoning the machine altogether, or we can think of it figuratively, not doing away with creative writing as an academic pursuit entirely, but dismantling the way that we teach and learn and publish and read. In order to experiment we need to move away from the now engrained, ubiquitous, defining beliefs/values/language, et cetera, of the creative writing culture. Reimagine new shapes and forms of classroom experience, new and different kinds of workshops, new and different kinds of projects, of publishing, of reading, of collaboration. We must begin to doubt that in the current culture we are seeing anything but that which we have been already looking at. As artists, we are always at that juncture. But perhaps, now, we have completely learned everything from what our eyes can see, and it's time to doubt, to shatter, to create fissures into which we empty ourselves. This is the experiment.

Footnotes

¹ David Foster Wallace, Commencement Address, Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio, May 2005.

² Raymond Federman, *Critifiction: Postmodern Essays*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

³ Gertrude Stein, *Picasso*, New York: Dover Publications, 1984.

⁴ See: <http://vidaweb.org/the-count-2010>

Writers of Experiment

Richard Sonnenmoser

I.

I'm uncomfortable with *experimental* as a category, as a sub-genre of anything, as, say, a section of the bookstore. Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Experimental. Those categories—fiction, poetry, drama—are problems, too, sometimes, of course. But they're problems that engender interesting arguments. Once we add the experimental section of the bookstore, though, I grow uncomfortable—and I don't want to argue. Part of me wants to hide. Who's training the employees about what goes where? And, at corporate headquarters, who's designed the scale weighing the seriously Experimental against casual, weekender Experimentalism?

A convenient label for the hard-to-classify thing, the ingenious hybrid, the brazen, the weird and, especially in prose fiction, the poetical, the term *experimental* is applied variously to writers who favor funky diction or to those who, to paraphrase James Wood in *How Fiction Works*, believe too much or too little in characters. (Especially those who believe too little.) And what about those who write really short stories? Or really long ones? Does subject matter? Experimental writers might be those who offer sympathetic portrayals of incest or residential arson or grieving dogs. Or what of tales that seemingly lack sympathy for their subjects, grieving or jubilant, human or otherwise?

So, I'm uncomfortable with experimental as a category.

Experimentation as *mode* is more palatable. What might we find by peering at the writers of experiment and what they're up to? My best guess is that more of us are testing the boundaries, dwelling in the borders, thinking of the fun that might be had, the beauty that might bloom by upturning one convention or another. Even writers who might seem to write "traditional fiction" are probably having this fun, blooming this beauty. So what, then, is a writer of experiment? Or, I think a better question: what is such a writer after?

Let's say, for now, as a kind of experiment, that some write toward discovery. Others, perhaps, to test principles.

Writing toward discovery, first. This is what Flannery O'Connor talks about in "Writing Short Stories":

When I started writing that story ["Good Country People"],
I didn't know there was going to be a PhD with a wooden

leg in it. I merely found myself one morning writing a description of two women I knew something about, and before I realized it, I had equipped one of them with a daughter with a wooden leg.

Accordingly, the bookstore would group together O'Connor with Raymond Carver who imagined, before reading O'Connor's essay, that writing toward discovery was his own peculiar and "uncomfortable secret." Stephen King should be here, too. Even, perhaps, J. K. Rowling. (I don't know enough about *how* she thinks as she writes to cast her elsewhere.)

Whether or not a reader believes a work to be experimental—or a group of readers with cultural power believe it—is inconsequential, according to this definition. David Foster Wallace belongs. So does Eudora Welty. Jonathan Franzen and Ben Marcus may be shelfmates. If you put words on the page without knowing where exactly you're going, if you're alive to the possibilities of what the fiction might demand, you belong.

It follows, then, that only the writer of experiment knows if there's in fact been an experiment. The bookstore can't declare who's in and out; the bookstore *wasn't there*. Only the writer is privy to the mode, and she's most likely a liar. About any one writer's experiments, we can only look at the disheveled or immaculate laboratory and guess.

II.

Once, at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, I co-taught an experimental writing course, *Lex Ed: The Art of Dictionarymaking*. My co-teacher, compositionist Sarah Stanley, and I wanted to teach a class where students would write original, novel definitions. We wanted to teach experimentally, too, so our only pedagogical plan was for everyone to write and share; we'd all offer critique. Eventually we'd publish the definitions. Two weeks into the term, we created together our syllabus:

We decided as a class on February 13, 2007, that we will be collaborating to produce a textual dictionary whose project will be to define many of the "weeds" of the English language. The *Weeds Dictionary* (working title) was born during our discussion of Jill Lepore's *The New Yorker* article on lexicographer Noah Webster, "Noah's Mark." More specifically, our idea sprang from Lepore's citation of Joseph Dennie, editor of the *Gazette of the United States*, a vocal

critic of Webster's project. "If, as Mr. Webster asserts," Dennie editorializes, "it is true that many new words have already crept into the language of the United States, he would be much better employed in rooting out those anxious weeds, than in mingling them with the flowers."

In producing *Rooted: An Alternative Dictionary* we wanted to take Dennie's metaphor—some words are weeds, others are flowers—and twist it and play with it until we'd created a dictionary of (and for?) the weeds. Colleagues would sometimes ask what our students were writing. After a while I found a facile answer: prose poems.

By definition, we were doing *experimental* writing. Yet during class meetings we used a workshop model popular in this country for more than sixty years. We had a syllabus with an attendance policy. We met in a classroom on campus. Without much resistance, without really discussing it, we'd fallen into prose poetry; we were making art objects with the English language. So what exactly was the experiment?

III.

Experimenting to test a principle is something else altogether, right? Is George Orwell this sort of experimenter? Ayn Rand? Art that tests a principle, especially one about public life—isn't that a thumb's width from propaganda? Sure, but at its best, this kind of experimentation is perhaps what John Gardner describes in *On Moral Fiction*:

One begins a work of fiction with certain clear opinions— for instance, I myself in a recent novel, *October Light*, began with the opinion that traditional New England values are the values we should live by: good workmanship, independence, unswerving honesty, and so on—and one tests those opinions in lifelike situations, puts them under every kind of pressure one can think of, always being fair to the other side, and what one slowly discovers, resisting all the way, is that one's original opinion was oversimple.

Experimental writing risks. That's a good definition. And a really bad one. It's improved if we understand that Gardner's risks aren't George Saunders's; Welty's may not be Wallace's. We wouldn't want them to be.

What does it mean to risk? Nothing's getting special protection, including the values of New England, whatever those are. The experimenter won't fudge the results to serve some end other than the fiction's. Here and there, resisting all the way, we must relinquish control. Chance must sometimes be in charge. When the PhD with the wooden

leg knocks, we open the door. We say, all right. Come in. Let's see what you're about.

The writer of experiment can't afford to uproot weeds, at least not intentionally. Of weeds and flowers, she can't always presume to know the difference.