TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF PSYCHIC DISTANCE

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> Address the most complicated problems in our culture, we ask
> students, but do it in short, sweet prose, we demand. While there
> is merit in being able to cut to the rhetorical quick, sometimes a
> complex sentence best conveys a complex idea.
>
> —Nate Kreuter (2009, par. 3)

> A great secret of the academic humanities has been their quiet but
> consistent exclusion of the arts as an activity, as a practice.
>
> — Kurt Spellmeyer (2003, p. 23)

In this chapter I will explore the theoretical significance and pedagogical potential of the narrative, stylistic concept psychic distance, which is very much rooted in the craft of writing as an activity and practice. Rhetoric and composition, in its quest for disciplinary prestige, has for decades been slamming the door on such craft-based approaches to teaching writing. As Douglas Hesse has argued, "One quality occluded in composition's very important political and social turns is that of writing as craft, as the making of textual artifacts whose maker is important as maker" (2003, p. 263). Wendy Bishop noted in 2003, "It has been more than a decade since craft—a word used regularly in creative writing and rarely in composition—and style have been discussed with intense interest" (2003, p. 263). No doubt many scholars consider the very word craft embarrassingly unsophisticated and old-fashioned, like something Grandpa would reminisce about while sipping Country Time lemonade on the porch. After all, according to Robert R. Johnson, "Over the past two millennia, craft has become a notion allied with 'lower forms' of knowledge usually associated with mere practice and the making of mundane artifacts" (2010, p. 674).

Yet I find myself drawn to the term craft, even more than style, perhaps because I entered rhetoric and composition from the "unrigorous" field down the hall— creative writing. Rhetoric and composition may have thrived as a discipline by turning its back on craft and style, but the teaching of composition has suffered.

Fortunately, although the ghost of disciplinary insecurity still haunts the halls of rhetoric and composition, forever fleeing the jangly, rusty chains of current-traditionalism and flying through walls to avoid critics' humiliating mockery of "the enormous inertial mass of [practitioner] lore," renewed attention to style has begun to repair the damage (North, 1987, p. 371). By focusing on an important element of craft and style borrowed from creative writing—psychic distance—we can improve the teaching of composition, help rejuvenate the idea- and style-friendly genre of the essay in its Montaignian roots, and pry open the door to new lines of inquiry. Psychic distance is not so much one among many "matters of surface-level technique," as style is often characterized, as it is a powerful rhetorical strategy with far-reaching implications (Mayers, 2005, p. 17).

PSYCHIC DISTANCE

What is psychic distance? In <u>The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers</u>, John Gardner defines it as "the distance the reader feels between himself and the events in the story" (1984, p. 111). In *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, Janet Burroway uses the equivalent term authorial distance, which she defines as "the degree to which we as readers feel on the one hand intimacy and identification with, or on the other hand detachment and alienation from, the characters in the story" (1996, p. 229). Gardner lists the following examples to illustrate how a writer can adjust language to reflect different degrees of closeness to a character's psychology or consciousness:

- It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
- Henry J. Warburton had never much cared for snowstorms.
- Henry hated snowstorms.
- God how he hated these damn snowstorms.
- Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul … (1984, p. 111)

The extremes of distance (sentence one) and closeness (sentence five) are easy to spot, but the "mid-range" (sentences two to four) represents a wealth of subtler distinctions. Gardner's sentences thus suggest the many rhetorical possibilities at the fingertips of fiction writers—and nonfiction writers, if we tweak the definition of psychic distance to mean the distance readers feel between themselves and the events and ideas in the prose rather than in the story, and if we consider the reader's identification with or detachment from the author or subject rather than the characters. Insofar as "identification between writers and readers is necessary prior to persuading people to other collective actions," psychic distance is tremendously rhetorical (Warnock, 2003, p. 208).

Making this shift from fictional to nonfictional psychic distance has the advantage of simplifying a complicated rhetorical phenomenon in fiction. As James Phelan explains in *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology*:

> First, the phrase "narrative as rhetoric" means something more than that narrative uses rhetoric or has a rhetorical dimension. It means instead that narrative is not just story but also action, the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose. Furthermore, […] this basic configuration of teller-story-situation-audience-purpose is at least doubled in most narrative: there is the narrator's telling the story to his or her audience and then the author's telling of the narrator's telling to the author's audience. Consequently, the narrator's telling is part of the author's construction of the whole narrative, and in that sense, what is a matter of the telling at one level becomes a matter of the told the next. (1996, pp. 7-8)

I will touch upon ways to apply such sophisticated understandings of fiction to composition, but first I want to establish that studying and practicing psychic distance can help composition students better understand and write nonfiction.

Composition faculty often foreground the rhetorical situation and the rhetorical appeals, which are crucial and which figure prominently in authors' decisions about psychic distance, but disproportionate attention to audience and the conventions of academic discourse can prevent students from exploring alternative forms of communication that are equally rhetorical but more subtle and imaginative. I'm not talking specifically here about "personal" writing, except in the sense that all writing is personal. Jim Corder makes this point nicely in his essay "Academic Jargon and Soul-Searching Drivel." He argues that:

> an academic paper (research) is not less opinion because it is empirical, and a personal essay (opinion) is not less empirical because it is personal. A research methodology is made by humans, not given by God; it is constructed from the lumber of disciplinary metaphor and value, deriving from opinion; a personal essay may rest upon ten years of close empirical study. (1991, p. 315)

Moreover, according to Chris Anderson, "Rhetoric is by definition a form of language acknowledging feelings and values not provable or quantifiable in logical demonstration" (1989, p. xxiii). Psychic distance does not apply, then, only to personal essays, creative nonfiction, and other overtly subjective genres. Nor does it apply piecemeal to narrative beginnings of otherwise traditional academic texts. The concept applies to all writing, insofar as writers can select from many ways of articulating the same idea.

If we consider Gardner's list of five sentences, traditional academic writing tends to privilege the language of the first, with its more distant and "objective" tone. Although psychic distance might at first seem synonymous with tone, I see at least one important distinction. Namely, whereas tone usually implies straightforward attention to, if not conformity to, readers' expectations—adjust your tone to match your audience—psychic distance suggests a subtler and more introspective attention to language and audience. Its foremost allegiance is to the writer's ideas, not their reception. In an academic paper, if a student writes, "The essay is so damn preachy and pretentious it makes me sick," one could easily respond by pointing out that academic readers expect a more thoughtful and rational tone—something more on the order of, "The author espouses his political agenda so dogmatically and in such stifling, esoteric language that the essay risks alienating many readers." In this example, a relatively clear awareness of audience determines what tone is appropriate. If students key in to an instructor's emphasis on tone, they might well write such a sentence to begin with. Either way, the psychic distance in the new sentence is predictably far, downplaying if not disguising the presence of the author and the author's emotions. As a result, the sentence communicates clearly but remains essentially flat. By contrast, with fiction and the kind of craft-based nonfiction I suggest we teach composition students, writers arguably have much more freedom not only to follow their intuition but also to select from among a greater array of linguistic possibilities. These possibilities might not always meet an audience's expectations, but they often enable writers to create an effective ethos that transcends genre conventions.

A second revision of the original sentence ("The essay is so damn preachy and pretentious it makes me sick") might be: "The author is so busy deconstructing, demystifying, interrogating, interpolating, negotiating, problematizing, politicizing, and otherwise theorizing that he leaves nonspecialist readers in the dust." This revision also eliminates the hostile and naïve tone of the original sentence, and it goes a step further to capture, with its string of fifty-cent verbs, the sensation of overwhelming erudition the student finds so objectionable. In addition, the phrase "in the dust" enables the writer to maintain a compelling subjective presence, or ethos, without sounding self-absorbed. In short, the

sentence allows readers to experience the writer's frustration, as opposed to reading a bland report of it. Viewed from this perspective, the original sentence suffered not so much because of its failure to attend to audience expectations but because of its failure to do justice to the student's idea.

If composition faculty would encourage this kind of reflective rhetorical creativity, through the kinds of analysis and writing exercises I will describe later, students would stand to become more confident and sophisticated writers. In addition, such encouragement would teach the value of taking risks and playing with language. If students remain unaware of this type of correlation between form and content, or if we invalidate their shaky but well-intentioned efforts to establish ethos, they will be inclined to learn a very different lesson: that taking risks with language jeopardizes their credibility and that if they try to play with language, they will pay. As a result, they will be more likely to passively internalize the conventions of academic writing, churning out cookie-cutter prose zapped of its original motivating energy and its potential power to communicate except on the most basic level.

What's so terrible about teaching students to communicate on a basic level? Wouldn't students in first-year composition courses, at least, be doing well to grasp the simpler concept of tone, complete with its focus on audience and conventions? Although psychic distance might seem like a luxurious linguistic indulgence best reserved for advanced composition courses, the concept can be taught in simple ways that composition students at all levels can grasp and apply. By examining how authors—including student authors—construct works of fiction and nonfiction from the inside out, in terms of craft, rather than from the outside in, in terms of disciplinary gestures and ideological critique, students can learn how "writer-based prose" can simultaneously act as "reader-based prose."

WRITER-BASED PROSE

Writer-based prose, which Linda Flower has called a "failure to transform private thought into a public, reader-based expression," has a bad reputation that is largely undeserved (1979, p. 19). Such prose supposedly indulges the selfish whims of the author while ignoring the practical needs of the reader. Flower concedes that a writer-based approach "may be a useful road into the creative process for some writers," but overall she dismisses it as "a dud for communicating that information to anyone else" (1979, pp. 28-29). Of course, it is possible to write in a way that is coherent only to the writer, and students who have no awareness of audience often fall prey to this rhetorical trap.

But writer-based prose need not be solipsistic and arhetorical. In "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience," Elbow articulates a two-pronged defense of writer-based prose. First he argues, "It's not that writers should never think about their audience. It's a question of when" (1987, p. 51). He notes that writers can find it particularly helpful to ignore audience in the early stages of composition, especially when writing for an intimidating audience such as an instructor. "Students often feel they 'don't have anything to say,'" he points out, "until they finally succeed in engaging themselves in private desert island writing for themselves alone" (1987, p. 214). Eventually an audience will prove invaluable, but too much attention to audience early in the writing process will often result in "a stilted, overly careful style or voice" (Elbow, 1987, p. 52). So far so good, you might think—as long as we're talking about inexperienced writers and as long as the writer eventually caters to the audience. Then Elbow makes his more radical and controversial claim that "writer-based prose can be better than reader-based prose" even for experienced writers. He argues that writers who obsess about audience expectations "are acting too much like a salesman trained to look the customer in the eye. […] 'Damn it, put all your attention on what you are saying,' we want to say, 'and forget about us and how we are reacting' (1987, pp. 53-54).

This idea that writer-based prose can be valuable not simply as a preliminary, confidence-boosting strategy for novice writers but as a hallmark of authorial integrity resonates well with psychic distance. When writers create more intimacy of psychic distance—whether subconsciously as they write or consciously as they revise—they are aligning their language first and foremost to their consciousness (in all its socially constructed complexity) and to their ideas, not their audience. Yet if writers are skillful enough and readers are open-minded enough, such writing has tremendous potential to engage and persuade. As Peter Vandenberg observes, "texts are often valued because they violate audience expectations" (1995, p. 80). John Schilb calls such writer-based choices rhetorical refusals—each one "an act of writing or speaking in which the rhetor pointedly refused to do what the audience considers rhetorically normal" (2007, p. 3). By helping writers to think about their stylistic choices in ways that may appease or frustrate an audience and be rhetorically appropriate either way, psychic distance thus reinforces Elbow's conclusion that

> [w]hat most readers value in really excellent writing is not prose that is right for readers but prose that is right for think-ing, right for language, or right for the subject being written about. If, in addition, it is clear and well suited to readers, we appreciate that." (1987, p. 54)

This powerful concept—that language can be rhetorically fitting regardless of how well it matches audience expectations—lies at the heart of psychic distance.

I'm not suggesting that we urge students to forget about audience altogether. Rather, I'm claiming that students could benefit from thinking about audience in a subtler, more roundabout way. In "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy," Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford examine Walter Ong's idea from "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction" that a writer can invoke rather than explicitly address an audience.[1] According to this view, "The central task of the writer is not to analyze an audience and adapt discourses to meet its needs. Rather, the writer uses the semantic and syntactic resources of language to provide cues for the reader—cues which help to define the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text" (Ede & Lunsford, 1984, p. 184). As Russell Long points out, this shift in perspective has major implications for composition pedagogy:

> Rather than beginning with the traditional question, "who is my audience?", we now begin with, "who do I want my audience to be?" Rather than encouraging a superficial, stereotyped view of reader[s], we are asking the student to begin with a statement about the audience she wants to create. What attitudes, ideas, actions are to be encouraged? This leads directly to questions of method: what distance between reader and subject should be established? What of diction and the creation of tone? What pieces of information do I want the reader to take for granted? Which do I want to detail and emphasize? Such questions shift the burden of responsibility upon the writer from that of amateur detective to that of creator, and the role of the creator is the most important and most basic the writer must play. (1980, p. 226)

Invoking an audience, then, is an alternative way for writers to generate the rhetorical power of identification. According to Gary C. Woodward in The *Idea of Identification*, "In its highest form identification offers the potent sensation of sharing another's consciousness. In the process, it diminishes the distance between the alien and the known, providing a sense of 'place' for ourselves in the external world" (2003, p. 18). Whereas conventional rhetorical approaches to identification stress the need to accommodate an audience's views, psychic distance implies the paradoxical need to reach out to readers by inviting them into one's own discourse.

As teachers of writing, we are very good at helping students understand why solipsistic writing is unpersuasive. But students should also be aware of the rhetorical pitfalls of thinking too much about audience. For example, if you write only with readers in mind, you'll be inclined to give them only what they want—or what you think they want. How many times have you read a student's essay and yawned at its amateurish attempt to please you with its politically correct analysis or interpretation? Who knows what the student actually thought of the story, film, essay, political controversy, or what have you? In an attempt to please you—the omnipotent reader—the student's own engagement and imagination spiraled down the drain. Yet because the student's ideological sweet nothings sound so good and because the essay shows evidence of the critical thinking and audience awareness you've tried so hard to encourage, you might shake off the fleeting impression that the paper was in fact not written by your student but by Eddie Haskell, the obsequious, two-faced friend on the TV show Leave It to Beaver. Gee whiz, Professor, affirmative action sure is valuable … like my grade.

Legendary New Yorker editor Wallace Shawn once expressed a similar concern that excessive editorial devotion to audience can turn otherwise curious readers into narrow-minded consumers. "Now the whole idea is that you edit for a market and if possible design a magazine with that in mind," he said. "Now magazines aren't started with the desire for someone to express what he believes." As a result, magazines reassure rather than challenge readers, depriving them of opportunities to "learn and grow" (as quoted in Bagdikian, 1983, p. 54).

Rather than consider the negative implications of such attention to audience, writing faculty who put their faith in reader-based prose imply that the reader/professor/customer is always right. "Unfortunately," Flower writes of narrative approaches to academic writing, "most academic and professional readers seem unwilling to sit through these home movies of the writer's mind at work" (1979, p. 25). Anyone who thinks these readers' impatience is "unfortunate" should respond to it with resistance, not resignation. Just as Shawn had the courage and integrity to stand up for his dissenting opinion, I share Corder's view that "[s]ince we don't have time, we must rescue time by putting it into our discourses and holding it there" (1985, p. 31).

RESCUING TIME

Of course, "rescuing time" is easier said than done. Yet scholars in rhetoric and composition already acknowledge and accept the impossibility of keeping up with the field today. There is simply too much scholarship—too many

books, too many journals, too many conferences. Rather than panic at this situation and scramble to read everything, which we must therefore hope will be presented to us as straightforwardly as possible, we should welcome a variety of discourse choices, in keeping with the richness of our field. If one is going to read a relevant journal of X number of pages anyway—or a stack of X number of essays—what difference does it make, in terms of time, if those pages consist of articles or essays? If anything, essays can be easier and therefore faster—not to mention more enjoyable—to read. "They valued convenience and upheld the status quo" would be a sad motto to inscribe on plaques and buildings honoring our professional legacy. If we wish to establish and assert meaningful disciplinary authority, we should advocate for causes in which we believe. Particularly with respect to teaching, time should be a significant consideration in our administrative deliberations. We should argue as adamantly for more time to respond to and assess more complicated student essays as we argue for smaller class sizes. If it is true that we often lose battles to reduce the size of classes, it is at least not for lack of effort. Why pride ourselves on our disciplinary integrity in one context and willingly sacrifice it in another?

As difficult as it may be to admit, our demand for textual efficiency may rest at least in part on our faulty association of "inefficient" texts with poorly edited "home movies." Too often we dismiss such texts without giving them a fair hearing. Flower's comment about home movies reminds me of a comment I once overheard after watching Citizen Kane in a movie theater. As my friend and I were leaving, basking in the film's brilliance, we overheard a teenager say to his companion, "Wow—movies sure have come a long way since then." If your standard for comparison and excellence is the fast-paced action flick, Citizen Kane doesn't stand a chance. Elbow describes a similar situation often faced by teachers. In "The Music of Form: Rethinking Organization in Writing," he notes that "when we read student papers in stacks of twenty or more, we easily slide into holding up each paper against a mental template of features that are supposed to be there—rather than genuinely *reading* it through time. We are short of time" (2006, p. 631, emphasis in original). As a result, "readers can be blind (deaf) to coherence that's actually in the text," albeit in subtler and more challenging forms than we expect (2006, p. 632). Elbow wisely concedes that writers cannot blame readers for failing to see coherence where it doesn't exist. After all, it would be arrogant to invoke Montaigne's assertion that "[i]t is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I" (as quoted in Klaus, 2012, p. 168). Still, this concession hardly invalidates the insight that audience expectations are themselves socially constructed, a fact we often forget. According to Pat C. Hoy II:

> Reading, we permit ourselves and our students to get waylaid

by theses and topic sentences instead of pausing to savor the twists and turns of the essayist's mind playing over rich material, entertaining doubt, wrestling with ambiguities. Tracking what we think of as the controlling idea, we tend to overlook what Stephen Jay Gould calls a hierarchy of ideas—the more elegant theory that accounts for the evidence and the complications, facts as well as uncertainties. (2001, p. 353, emphases in original)

To the extent that academic readers demand a "proper" tone—that is, the tone they have been conditioned to accept as natural in a given rhetorical situation—they blackmail writers into linguistic conformity.

Sometimes this conformity is appropriate, but at other times it might not be the most effective—or the most ethical—way to craft one's text. As Chris Holcomb points out, "Things fall apart when the players—writer and reader—fail to play their parts. Readers fail when they become too dismissive or prematurely impatient, and writers fail when they become too intent on dazzling" (Holcomb, p. 204). Just the same, I'll take a class of aspiring dazzlers over a class of obedient conformists any day. As Ian Barnard wonders in "The Ruse of Clarity," "Surely inexpert complexity is preferable to expert simplicity if it is indicative of intellectual wrestling and scholarly ambition rather than the complacency of comfort?" (2010, p. 446).

TONE IT DOWN?

Unlike tone, psychic distance privileges the writer's perspective—not as a vacuum-sealed celebration of romantic, dazzling individualism but as a way of more closely aligning words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and entire texts with the writer's ideas. If the writer fails at this admittedly difficult task, the audience will say so—for example, during a workshop. Then the writer must decide how much, or even whether, to revise. But if the writer succeeds, the audience will welcome even the most unconventional stylistic choices—provided readers are willing to engage the writer and look beyond the "mental template of features that are supposed to be there" (Elbow, 2006, p. 631).

As an example of writing whose power to resonate hinges on an audience's willingness to enter an unfamiliar perspective, consider Jamaica Kincaid's essay "On Seeing England for the First Time." After describing and reflecting on her colonialist upbringing in Antigua, she recounts a recent trip to England to see

the places she had been indoctrinated to worship since she was a child. She ends her essay with this sentence:

> The white cliffs of Dover, when finally I saw them, were cliffs, but they were not white; you would probably only call them that if the word "white" meant something special to you; they were dirty and they were steep; they were so steep, the correct height from which all my views of England, starting with the map before me in my classroom and ending with the trip I had just taken, should jump and die and disappear forever. (2000, p. 220)

When I first assigned this essay in an upper-division composition course at the University of Colorado at Boulder, most students—no doubt many of them under the Anglophile spell of Harry Potter—were shocked and offended by the rhetorical one-two punch of Kincaid's "audacious" postcolonial perspective and her correspondingly unrelenting style. Granted, Kincaid wrote this essay for *Transition*, a publication that The Village Voice has called "the only decent forum for black intellectuals" ("Transition"). To the extent that my class had no black intellectuals, they were not the intended audience. Therefore, some would argue, it is irrelevant if a group of mostly white, relatively conservative undergraduates fails to appreciate the essay's ideas or literary merit. Fair enough—to an extent. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised when the first comment of class discussion was, "I don't see what she's so upset about," followed shortly by, "This was the worst essay I've ever read."

But suppose Kincaid had written this essay for undergraduates. Or suppose she had been invited to revise her essay to better suit its new rhetorical situation of being published in *The Best American Essays 2000*, with its larger and more general audience. If Kincaid had had such an opportunity, should she have "toned down" her anger and resentment, repackaging it in more palatable prose? Should she have written less emotionally, changing "should jump and die and disappear forever" to "should perhaps be reconsidered"—the kind of suggestion we might make for a student? I think not. Even if maintaining an intimate level of psychic distance means that her essay enrages rather than enlightens most students or other readers, perhaps that's the price she must pay for being true to her experience and convictions. Maybe provoking readers is a realistic enough rhetorical goal, given the level of audience resistance. Such provocation could be more valuable in raising awareness of her perspective than the easy dismissal that a more conventional version would be likely to produce. The alienation

many of my students felt from Kincaid's implied author was likely a result not of any rhetorical failure on her part to invite them into her consciousness via close psychic distance, but of students' inability to engage a perspective that threatens their identities. As Barry Kroll argues,

> If we focus too much attention on writing for an audience—whether conceived as a "target receiver," a "needy reader," or a "constructive participant"—we may narrow our view of composing, forgetting that writing is also an exploration of ideas, a quest for purpose, and a projection of oneself. (1984, p. 183)

In other words, identification is a two-way street.

But should we allow privileged white students to get away with creating zoomed-in psychic distance when writing about the unfairness of, say, affirmative action in higher education? Wouldn't it be a double-standard to celebrate close psychic distance in the work of progressives while prohibiting it among conservatives? I think the answer has to be yes. That doesn't mean, though, that we should stand back and applaud any claim based on personal experience, provided the author uses psychic distance skillfully. Candace Spigelman advocates "the interrogation of assumptions as a means of evaluating the arguments in personal experience stories" (2004, p. 102). Here is where an audience steps in and helps writers evaluate the validity of their ideas. In Kincaid's case, I imagine her assumptions would hold up quite well to critical scrutiny, considering the wealth of postcolonial scholarship that confirms her ideas and arguments. What about the student writer who assumes that racism ended with the Civil Rights Act, thus eliminating the very premise of affirmative action? Obviously this assumption would not withstand critical scrutiny. My point here is that there's a big difference between a writer using a close degree of psychic distance to explore a valid idea—whether invoking personal experience or not—and a writer using a close degree of psychic distance to explore an invalid idea. Insofar as the argument is sound, the skillful use of psychic distance will tend to make the writing more engaging and persuasive, at least for readers who have an open mind about the possibilities of academic discourse. Insofar as the underlying argument is questionable, an audience has the duty to point this out to the writer, usually during a workshop or instructor conference.

Unless writers have at least the initial freedom to indulge "writerly" impulses and to adapt their language not to an audience's expectations but to their own ideas, they will be more likely to produce a picture of a mind conforming rather than a mind thinking. Take insecure student writers and tell them to

fixate on audience, and what do you often get? Timid prose that seldom takes risks, or if it does take risks, does so rarely and flinchingly. If we value safe, predictable texts that are basically five-paragraph themes taken to a "new level," no problem. But if we believe "college-level writing instruction should ask students to do something that is *difficult*, something that strives for more than mere competence," and if we want students to explore their own ideas and take rhetorical risks to create original, compelling essays, we should focus on psychic distance more than tone (Heilker, 2006, p. 201, emphasis in original).

Although I don't have much space to elaborate here, the (non-five-paragraph) essay is arguably the ideal genre for composition students to apply the rhetoric of style. According to Cristina Kirklighter in Traversing the Democratic Borders of the Essay, "Instead of working toward definitive conclusions, as in an article, the essay's spontaneity allows the writer to wander, to make connections in unusual places, to emphasize discoveries instead of conclusions" (2002, p. 6). Mind you, I'm as happy as anyone to teach students the conventions of writing, say, a recommendation report in a business writing course, but I don't pretend that such occasions offer writers a wealth of stylistic possibilities. On this point, I disagree with Andrew Bourelle, who argues that:

> [...] when writers make decisions within disciplinary con-
> texts, those are stylistic decisions. A lab report that adheres
> to a specific sectional format, that contains passive sentence
> constructions, and that is written via a seemingly voiceless
> narrator—that, in other words, seems void of style—is still
> written with style. All students studying writing—not just
> those in first-year composition courses—could benefit from
> a closer look at the style in the types of writing they are sup-
> posed to emulate. (2010, p. 105)

I agree that such genres contain style, which students can analyze and emulate. And of course they offer some possibilities for stylistic choice. Yet we should keep in mind Nora Bacon's point in "Style in Academic Writing" that "different kinds of discourse permit different degrees of stylistic experimentation and play" (this volume). When you contrast the stylistic potential of, say, a lab report and an essay—a genre that Heilker has called "kineticism incarnate"—you can see that the lab report locks student writers in a stylistic prison and throws away the key (1994, p. 169). As a former composition student of mine, Jeremey Logan, wrote in his stylistically engaging end-of-semester reflective essay: "The best essays are like Bugs Bunny: They lean against a wall, cross one leg over the other, and shoot you straight, while munching on a carrot. They're

casual and comfortable. They convince you by not worrying if you're convinced. The essayist ain't running for office, and he [or she] ain't selling windows."

BEYOND VOICE

I've explained how psychic distance differs from tone, but how does it differ from voice? And why would it be a more useful element of craft for reclaiming the essay? As the most craft-based pedagogy, expressivism already privileges voice—to its credit. As Christopher Burnham points out in *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, "Expressivist pedagogy encourages, even insists upon, a sense of writer presence even in research-based writing. This presence—'voice' or ethos—whether explicit, implicit, or absent, functions as a key evaluation criterion when expressivists examine writing" (Burnham, 2001, p. 19). Elbow has called voice "the life and rhythms of speech" (1985, p. 291). Enos has explored voice as "transforming ethos" that requires "dialogic action, where both writer and reader are aware of, and enjoy, the engagement" (2007, p. 194). Robert M. Gorrell has argued that voice "manifests itself by establishing a position in space and time and by expressing a tone, an attitude toward the audience and toward the subject matter" (1984, p. 158). Voice, ethos, tone, presence, style, psychic distance. I tend to agree with Darsie Bowden that such "distinctions are seemingly endless and often more confusing than illuminating" (1995, p. 187). Ultimately it's not the terms that matter so much as what you do with the concepts. But by exploring psychic distance alongside voice, I hope to show that there are some conceptual differences with practical implications for teaching.

Clearly psychic distance and voice share much in common. I don't mean to imply that the former should replace the latter as a key term in our professional lexicon. As a rhetorical strategy that appeals to readers obliquely, psychic distance resembles voice in Elbow's less popular sense that

> the music of prosidy enacts some of the meaning so that
> we "hear" it. It's as though the meaning comes to us rather
> than us having to go after it. So if a writer is skilled enough
> to write sentences that readers actually hear—hearing the
> accents, rhythms, and melody in the silent words on the
> page—readers will actually "hear" some of the meaning.
> (2006, p. 643)

Work in linguistics on the poetic function of language supports this "latent tendency, which may become patent in certain circumstances, for the sounds of a given word to be congruent with (similar to) their meanings" (Waugh,

1985, p. 156). Understanding how to fine-tune psychic distance or voice can help students—and scholars—pull off this rhetorical feat of enabling readers to "hear" meaning, and not just with individual words.

At the same time, psychic distance implies more of an invoked audience than voice, and thus it invites if not demands even closer attention to the relationships between language and meaning, form and content. It is certainly possible to praise a piece of writing for its "strong voice" and then go into detail about how the writer creates that voice, but it is equally possible—and perhaps more common—to praise a "strong voice" or criticize a weak one without specifying its subtle dynamics. However, when you praise or critique a piece of writing for its use of psychic distance, you have little choice but to elaborate on the details of language that create it.

Of course, close attention to the details of language isn't everything. Elbow makes this point when he explains why voice is a more useful pedagogical term than style:

> To talk about style is to focus on the actual language and syntax itself. To talk about voice, on the other hand, is to be in a way more roundabout and imprecise, that is, to talk about how the words ask to be performed or spoken. (2000, pp. 169-70)

He goes on to note that "students and untrained readers are often more sophisticated in getting at how language works when they talk in terms of voice than when they talk about textual style" (2000, p. 170).

Psychic distance offers the best of both worlds. For writers, in particular, it can create a comfortable balance between psychology and craft. It enables them to think broadly about how closely they want their writing to mirror their thinking—and therefore the degree of identification they wish to foster—yet it also demands sentence-level attention to the nuances that will create the desired distance. Another difference between voice and psychic distance returns us to the question of audience. Just as students are often asked to adjust their tone to their audience, Gorrell refers to "the importance of fitting voice to audience" (1984, p. 157). Even Elbow argues "for crafting a voice that fits the audience" ("2007, p. 179). He offers the example of a student who must write "for a reader who wants a very restricted academic voice or register—a reader who is not just uninterested in my presence but who will in fact be put off if she feels too much contact with 'me'" (2000, p. 215). Like Flower's reader who is "unwilling to sit through these home movies of the writer's mind at work," this reader in effect coerces the writer into conformity (1979, p. 25). In

a characteristic attempt to embrace contraries, Elbow argues that it's possible to "let the 'wrong voice' have free reign, and then in late drafts adjust or get rid of the offending bits but keep the energy" (2000, p. 216). No doubt this strategy sometimes saves the day, but what about when a writer, such as Kincaid or an ambitious composition student, wishes to write in such a personal voice—even in a research-based essay that contains zero autobiographical references—that conservative readers would object to the whole text, not just a few "offending bits," no matter how sophisticated and talented the writer? In other words, what if the text's energy is the "offending bit," in the form of a strong voice or an intimate level of psychic distance? Must the writer conform and revise her entire work? Of course it's up to her. She can cave in completely to audience demands—and probably silence her voice the next time around. She can change nothing and admit rhetorical defeat—and, if she's a student, risk a bad grade. Or she can compromise. Compromise is often necessary and good, but only when it's reciprocal. Unfortunately, many academic readers in positions of power, including writing instructors, have no strong incentive to embrace voice-driven writing, to meet voice-driven writers halfway—except in explicitly personal essays, which are often followed by thesis-driven research papers that forbid a strong voice and a narrative structure. In "'Playing Safe': Undergraduate Essay Writing and the Presentation of the Student 'Voice,'" Barbara Read, Becky Francis, and Jocelyn Robson present research suggesting that "the unequal power relationship between student and lecturer, constructed through hegemonically dominant academic discourse, influences the way in which the student voice is presented" (2001, p. 390). This fact bothers me to a degree that it doesn't seem to bother Elbow. The main problem, as I see it, is that more academic readers need to become better listeners, not that more writers need to lower their voices or become ventriloquists. Jane E. Hindman has voiced a legitimate concern that "our [reading] practices undermine, if not censure, innovative textual production, disciplining their subversive potential" (2003, 14).

More than tone or voice, psychic distance offers readers the two attitudes that Carl Rogers claimed foster creative thinking: psychological safety and psychological freedom. According to William Zeigler, "Psychological safety means that one feels one's own worth is unconditionally assured, that one fears no judgment or criticism, and that one is understood empathetically. Psychological freedom means that one feels free to express oneself symbolically" (p. 464). Whereas freewriting provides these conditions only initially in the writing process, before writers subject their voice-driven writing to what is often a gavel-wielding, voice-stifling audience, psychic distance preserves these conditions even at the revision stage. That doesn't mean writers acquire a Get-out-of-Audience-Free card. As always, readers need to assess an argument's

assumptions and evidence. In addition, audience remains crucial to the extent that readers must evaluate how compelling a text is.

The term psychic distance also has metaphorical appeal. I don't want to overstate it, lest I fall prey to Philip Eubanks's cautionary note that "[t]oo often writing scholarship alternates between assertions that a particular metaphor is pernicious and speculations that another metaphor may be the answer to all of our aspirations" (2001, p. 115). Still, just as voice has power in writing because it helps us think of texts as vocal expressions, psychic distance has its own unique power to evoke the visual/spatial metaphor of distance. In my experience, composition students often welcome the term psychic distance—in part, I think, because it helps them visualize themselves as writers in proximity to readers, or as readers in proximity to—or at a great remove from—academic writers. But again, this kind of audience awareness is a far cry from the kind of deferential audience awareness often implied by tone.

Finally, for scholars who criticize voice for its implicit association with "authentic self," psychic distance might prove a more defensible term. Elbow has made the case that:

> even if we are completely at odds about the nature of selves or identities, about whether people even have such things, and about the relation of a text to the person who wrote it, we have a good chance of reaching agreement about whether any given text has audible voice, what kind of dramatic voice it has, whether it has a recognizable or distinctive voice, and whether the writer was able to achieve authority of voice. (2000, p. 205)

As Elbow has acknowledged, "I clearly failed to get people to use those distinctions" (2007, p. 183). For scholars such as Frank Farmer, who feels that we need "to deliver voice from its long romance with the true self" (1995, p. 318), and Bowden, who argues that "[t]he assumption that language is first and foremost a social activity seems to be obscured by the use of voice […]," psychic distance could be more appealing, given its subtle but unmistakable relationship to audience (1999, p. 65). In its very name, psychic distance reinforces the need to negotiate the space between writer and audience.

Of course, faculty can decide for themselves how much leeway students should have to experiment with psychic distance in their writing. You might agree with David Bartholomae that students "have to speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom" (1997, p. 610), or you might agree with Berlin that

> we are not simply offering training in a useful technical skill that
> is meant as a simple complement to the more important studies
> of other areas. We are teaching a way of experiencing the world,
> a way of ordering and making sense of it. (1996, p. 246)

Or perhaps you hold any number of other complicated, overlapping views about the nature and value of academic discourse. But regardless of whether you ask students to slavishly uphold or steadfastly subvert every convention—or perhaps more likely fall somewhere in between—you can still use psychic distance rhetorically to suit your particular purpose and pedagogy.

PSYCHIC DISTANCE IN THE CLASSROOM

How can we help composition students internalize an awareness of psychic distance? Of course one might take any number of approaches, in any number of contexts. At the risk of sounding like "someone tell[ing] about their experiences on drugs"—that is, someone who values classroom experience—let me outline a few of the techniques I've used with some success at various curricular levels, ranging from first-year composition to upper-division courses such as Topics in Writing and Writing on Science and Society (Dworkin, 2004, p. 604).

I often introduce psychic distance by giving students a handout (see Appendix A) that shows Gardner's and Burroway's definitions, Gardner's list of five sentences, and a short excerpt from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. (Please take a minute to read this excerpt.) Because students sometimes grasp the concept of psychic distance more easily by first considering examples from fiction—perhaps because the definition of psychic distance comes to us from creative writing—I explain the context of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and read the excerpt aloud, asking students to focus, in small groups, on the shift in psychic distance that begins most noticeably in the third paragraph. Some groups focus so much on the action in this paragraph that they fail to see the shift in psychic distance. A student might say to me as I check in on his or her group, "The language gets more intense. There are some really strong words like groan, choking, and stabbed." I tell them that this is true, but I ask them to think more about the relationship between language and identification. "Why," I might ask, "does Oscar Wilde say 'someone choking with blood'? Why does he say 'The thing was still seated in the chair'? Those are curious word choices. Why would Wilde use this kind of language?" At this point students sometimes veer in the opposite interpretive direction, noting the vague language and concluding that Wilde is pulling back the psychic distance so that

readers cannot easily identify with him. Other groups hit the nail on the head. Inevitably, though, even if it takes some encouragement, students point to more examples of the suddenly distant language—"the outstretched arms," "the man did not move"—and realize that it perfectly reflects Dorian's consciousness and guilty conscience (Wilde, 1988, p. 123). The writing reflects his attempt to distance himself mentally from his actions and from the humanity of his friend turned victim.

After making sure that students grasp the basic operation of psychic distance in this admittedly sophisticated excerpt, we look at other details of Wilde's language. As early as the first sentence of the second paragraph, in the phrase "an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him," we can see the relationship between Wilde's diction and Dorian's psychological withdrawal from his emotions—and their moral implications. The fact that Wilde uses Basil's full name in this sentence is significant. It mirrors Dorian's perception that Basil is suddenly more of a stranger than a friend. In addition, the phrase "came over him," with its implication that Dorian is unaccountable for his own hatred, not only reinforces the conceit that the portrait is the controlling force but also foreshadows Dorian's imagined absence from the scene of the crime. Students benefit from considering the similar second-paragraph phrases "he loathed the man" and "crushing the man's head down on the table" (Wilde, 1988, p. 123). Simply asking students why Wilde might have made these language choices can elicit good responses and focus the discussion on psychic distance.

Whether or not readers consciously recognize this shift in psychic distance as they read the novel is irrelevant, so long as they experience it. Although we often teach students the paramount importance of writing for an audience, it seems doubtful that Wilde dwelled on audience in the passage above. During John Douglas's libel trial, after all, Wilde said, in response to questions about the novel, "What concerns me in my art is my view and my feeling and why I made it; I don't care twopence what other people think about it" (as quoted in Holland, p. 80). According to Donald Lawler in *An Inquiry into Oscar Wilde's Revisions of The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "the dominant motive underlying all the important changes made by Wilde was an artistic desire to suppress an underlying moral which Wilde considered too obvious and, for that reason, distracting." Lawler notes that "such revisions were far from haphazard nor were they made, as has commonly been supposed, either in self-defense following the criticisms of the Lippincott's version or required to fill out the needed pages for a full-length novel" (1988, p. 2). Wilde's additions to the ending "help to direct our interest to the hero's mental state rather than to his moral state" (Lawler, 1988, p. 38). In other words, it seems that Wilde was not thinking much about

pleasing his audience. He was too busy paying attention to Dorian and how best to craft the scene so that it would be, in Elbow's words, "right for thinking, right for language, or right for the subject being written about" (1987, p. 54). Talking with students about how published writers such as Wilde seem to have crafted their work without slavish attention to audience "demands" can help them imagine ways that they, too, might appeal to readers in a roundabout fashion by focusing more on issues of craft and less on the need to conform to their professors' expectations.

After students discuss psychic distance in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I read students the section of the handout about how psychic distance translates to nonfiction. Then I invite students to complete the short writing exercise on the handout (see Appendix A). Hearing volunteers read their revisions of the sentence "The weather is very cold today" helps students recognize the range of possible language available to them when they consider psychic distance. Their revisions often feature more visceral, embodied language than the original sentence.

Continuing with the handout, I briefly explain the unique advantages of the term psychic distance—why it can be better than tone, voice, or style (see Appendix A). Then I ask students to read and discuss the opening two paragraphs of an essay by my former student Jeremy Kellogg, an undergraduate at CU-Boulder. Students discuss the ways that Jeremy, in this rhetorical analysis of a local commercial space, uses psychic distance to help readers share his perspective as a man who feels uncomfortable in such a feminine environment (Victoria's Secret). For example, we analyze the ways in which his use of impersonal, "masculine" language reflects his feelings of discomfort and alienation, and we discuss the rhetorical role and stylistic dynamics of the military metaphor.

Next I like to show students the title sequence of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Judging by the number of hands that shoot up when I ask who has read the book or seen the film, it's a good example because it's familiar and creates a kind of common ground. Before I show the title sequence, I make sure everyone realizes that the film is told from the perspective of children, and I ask them to keep an eye out for details that establish psychic distance. After showing the clip, I ask students, "What did you see? What's going on with psychic distance here?" They point out a number of ways the film invites viewers to share the perspective of children. For example, even before we see the first image of the film, we hear the slow, simple opening notes of a piano while the earth of the Universal International© logo spins. It sounds like a child practicing the piano. The crucial first image of the film shows a weathered cigar box, shot from overhead, which is presently opened by a pair of young hands. Inside we

see two wooden dolls, several coins and marbles, a variety of crayons, and other objects traditionally associated with childhood. The camera slowly zooms in on the box, as if we have been invited to leave our adult concerns and join the childhood world of play. We hear a child's voice humming idly, and an extreme close-up reveals a small hand grabbing a crayon and proceeding to color over invisible words on a page that reveal the film's title. We hear the crayon slide across the paper.

Throughout the sequence, we never see what this child looks like. To have shown someone specific would have compromised the psychic distance, snapping us out of the immediacy of the moment. Tight close-ups enable us to identify far more closely. To children, of course, small objects are not so small, but even more important than this literal fact is that the close-ups reflect the intensity of children's playful imaginations—the large presence of small things. The remaining shots of the sequence consist of more extreme close-ups of childhood objects, such as crayons, marbles, and a whistle. Each shot is filmed with the unrushed fluidity of a summer afternoon, a sensation furthered by the choice of transitions—slow dissolves that give the impression of one moment melting into the next. The sequence ends when a piece of paper drawn with a bird is ripped down the middle, revealing a patch of black into which the establishing shot of the town dissolves seamlessly, tree branches sprouting over the frayed edges of the page. The title sequence lasts just three minutes, but it packs a powerful lesson in the craft of psychic distance.

The way I have analyzed this sequence might give the impression that I stand in front of the class and pontificate about psychic distance. Nothing could be further from the truth. Students are perfectly capable of analyzing many of these subtleties of craft, and I invite them to do so. Their familiarity with film and their attunement to visual rhetoric never fails to impress me. To build their critical confidence and to help them better understand psychic distance—and, more importantly, to apply their understanding of psychic distance—I show students more film clips and ask them to analyze and interpret the use of psychic distance.

Because students always comment on the correlation between the opening scene's close-ups and psychic distance, I like to follow *To Kill a Mockingbird* with a short clip from Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Bleu* that features an important close-up at a key moment in the film. Juliette Binoche's character Julie, a recent widow seeking to block out all memory of the tragic deaths of her husband and daughter, is thrown off guard momentarily by the sudden appearance of her husband's assistant, who is in love with her. In the scene, which takes place in a café, she rejects the man and he leaves. Then we see a very tight close-up of her cup of coffee as she dips a sugar cube into its surface. The sugar cube slowly

sucks up the coffee, and then she lets it fall into the cup. It's a quick shot, lasting just a few seconds, but as Kieslowski explains in an interview on the film's DVD, the close-up is a significant reflection of Julie's psychology. Sitting in front of his editing machine, Kieslowski replays the clip and asks, "What does this obsession with close-ups mean?" He explains:

> Simply that we're trying to show the heroine's world from her point of view, to show that she sees these little things, things that are near to her, by focusing on them in order to demonstrate that the rest doesn't matter to her. She's trying to contain, to put a lid on her world and on her immediate environment. […] We made a very tight shot of the sugar cube sucking up the coffee to show that nothing around her matters to her—not other people nor their business, nor the boy, the man who loves her and went through a great ordeal to find her. She just doesn't care. Only the sugar cube matters, and she intentionally focuses on it to shut out all the things she doesn't accept.

Kieslowki's comments serve both to demonstrate the value of psychic distance and to validate students' observations about film technique in *To Kill a Mockingbird.*

I sometimes ask students to analyze the relationship between film techniques and psychic distance in clips from concert videos by Coldplay and The Dave Matthews Band. The Coldplay video that I show uses chaotic camerawork and fast-paced editing to mirror the fast pace of the music and to capture the energy and immediacy of the concert experience, while the video I show by the Dave Matthews Band uses slow dissolves and lengthy shots of the performers to focus more on the musicianship. Each clip uses the language of film to create a particular degree of psychic distance.

Following up such an introduction to psychic distance with collaborative presentations that ask students to analyze effective and ineffective examples in print and multimedia can help ensure that the concept does not evaporate from the class. One group of students presented two car-chase scenes from popular films. Students argued that the first clip was much more effective in inviting viewers to identify with the protagonist driving the car. The scene's use of point of view and cinematography, such as shots of the driver shifting gears and pressing the gas pedal, created a greater degree of intimacy, students argued. By contrast, a different film that also featured a protagonist driving a car in a chase scene tended to alienate viewers by "zooming out" the degree of

psychic distance. For example, the scene was filmed from many more points of view, including that of frazzled pedestrians scurrying not to be run over by the swerving vehicle.

Another way to emphasize the importance of psychic distance is to include the term as an explicit assessment criterion on writing assignments and grading rubrics. Unless you follow through on your desire to reinforce the importance of psychic distance by making it a vital part of the class vocabulary, students will forget about it—and justifiably so.

INTERNALIZING PSYCHIC DISTANCE

The goal of analyzing and experimenting with psychic distance is not to train students to consult some mental psychic-distance yardstick every time they write a sentence. Rather, the goal is to help them internalize an awareness of psychic distance. I imagine that the majority of literary novelists—as opposed to genre writers who follow clear, predictable formulas and whose works many instructors duly disparage—do not write with more than a vague consciousness of audience or psychic distance. Yet such inattention hardly diminishes these writers' accomplishments or their works' rhetorical power. What difference does it make to readers that Virginia Woolf, while writing *To the Lighthouse*, did not ponder the fact that some of her sentences "contain unanchored tenses, requiring an RT from a neighboring narrative present predicate" or that she uses the linguistic elements of "semantic connector linking, temporal linking, and the progressive aspect" (Ehrlich, 1990, pp. 97, 102)?

The same process of internalization applies to professional writers of nonfiction, including Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, a work Pamela J. Annas cites as an "example of powerful writing that can be produced out of the very tension between writer and audience." Annas notes that "Woolf breaks all the rules about thesis statements by burying hers in the middle of a two-page paragraph and undercutting it by calling it 'an opinion upon one minor point'" (1985, p. 365). No doubt such masterful rhetorical moves did not fall into Woolf's lap from her heavenly muse, but neither did she most likely think, "Aha, I'll disguise my thesis here to throw off the reader." Of course she made rhetorical choices, but I'm suggesting that accomplished writers often make these choices subconsciously and intuitively—as well as by consciously revising, like Montaigne, to adjust psychic distance. According to Fenton Johnson, author of nonfiction, novels, a memoir, and numerous essays in publications such as Harper's, "When writing, I don't think a split second about the reader" (Johnson, Fenton. personal interview, February 3, 2004).

Good writers are often too busy paying attention to their own ideas and how best to express them to contemplate the rhetorical triangle. Subconsciously, thanks to a cultivation of craft, these writers know exactly what they're doing. Just as students can enrich their writing by internalizing linguistic structures using the techniques of sentence pedagogies, they can also study and practice shifts in psychic distance to cultivate an inner ear for what language will be most appropriate in a given situation. As Robert J. Connors argues in "The Erasure of the Sentence," when students internalize linguistic structures, they become "free to engage in the informed processes of choice, which are the wellspring of creativity" (2000, p. 102). Sharon A. Myers has refined sentence pedagogies to focus less on the grammar of phrases and clauses and more on the "grammar of words" (2003, p. 617). She argues that "words are much more real to students than abstract rules" (2003, p. 621). Even more real, perhaps, are the words and phrases and clauses that students attend to when they think about psychic distance in particular sentences and paragraphs and texts. Because psychic distance demands attention to context, it is more conducive to internalization. Therefore if we invite students to explore ideas that sincerely interest them, without shackling them to the rhetorical triangle, and if we encourage them to pay attention to psychic distance—a very different kind of audience awareness— then their writer-based prose will likely end up being reader-based as well.

Attention to craft—and psychic distance in particular—has the potential to expand students' understanding of rhetoric and to spark fresh interdisciplinary scholarship devoted to narrative. "Art is better understood as a verb rather than a noun," Spellmeyer writes in *Arts of Living: Reinventing the Humanities for the Twenty-First Century* (2003, p. 167). Instead of "methodically dismissing as irrelevant the inner experience of writing," composition instructors should be fostering an "*intensification of subjectivity*" (emphasis in original). Ironically, rather than theorize the "textual" world in a never-ending quest to zap false consciousness, we might achieve better results in the classroom by considering the perspective(s) of the artist. "The way in becomes the way out," Spellmeyer writes (2003, p. 196). To the extent that psychic distance can help us and our students find our way in—for example, into original, idea-driven essays and into meaningful scholarly conversations—it deserves an active role in our composition classrooms and scholarly journals.

NOTES

1. In "Representing Audience: 'Successful' Discourse and Disciplinary Critique," Lunsford and Ede revisit their earlier essay and acknowledge that in it they had not "consider[ed] the powerful effects of ideology working through genres, such as those

inscribed in academic essayist literacy, to call forth and thus to control and constrain writers and audiences" (1996, p. 171). In both essays they note that "students have less power than teachers and thus less freedom in some rhetorical situations than in others" (1996, p. 170). Therefore, it seems that ideology tends to "control and constrain" academic writers more than audiences.

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APPENDIX A: PSYCHIC DISTANCE HANDOUT

Psychic distance is a term John Gardner uses in *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers.* He defines it as "the distance the reader feels between himself and the events in the story" (111). In *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, Janet Burroway uses the equivalent term *authorial distance*, which she defines as "the degree to which we as readers feel on the one hand intimacy and identification with, or on the other hand detachment and alienation from, the characters in the story" (229). Gardner lists the following examples to illustrate how a writer can adjust language to reflect different degrees of closeness to a character's psychology or consciousness:

1. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
2. Henry J. Warburton had never much cared for snowstorms.
3. Henry hated snowstorms.
4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.
5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul … (111)

Notice how these sentences take us progressively closer into the character's perspective, into his head, so that we experience what he thinks and feels.

Now consider how psychic distance works in three paragraphs from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

> **Context**: Dorian never ages, but a portrait of him does. The portrait reflects his moral corruption. In this scene Dorian's friend Basil is trying to persuade him to repent and change his sinful lifestyle. Dorian doesn't want to hear it.

1. [Basil:] "You have done enough evil in your life. My God! Don't you see that accursed thing [the portrait] leering at us?"

2. Dorian Gray glanced at the picture, and suddenly an uncontrollable feeling of hatred for Basil Hallward came over him, as though it had been suggested to him by those grinning lips. The mad passions of a hunted animal stirred within him, and he loathed the man who was seated at the table, more than in his whole life he had ever loathed anything… . He rushed at him, and dug the knife into the great vein that is behind the ear, crushing the man's head down on the table, and stabbing him again and again.

3. There was a stifled groan, and the horrible sound of someone choking with blood. Three times the outstretched arms shot up convulsively, waving grotesque stiff-fingered hands in the air. He stabbed him twice more, but the man did not move. Something began to trickle on the floor… . The thing was still seated in the chair, straining over the table with bowed head, and humped back, and long fantastic arms. Had it not been for the red jagged tear in the neck, and the clotted black pool that was slowly widening at the table, one would have said that the man was simply asleep.

How and why does the psychic distance change, especially in the third paragraph? Point to details of language.

How Does Psychic Distance Translate to Nonfiction?

Fiction writers who think about psychic distance have many rhetorical possibilities at their fingertips. But so can nonfiction writers, if we tweak the definition of *psychic distance* to mean <u>the distance readers feel between themselves and the events *and ideas* in the *prose*</u> (rather than in the story) and if we consider

the reader's identification with or detachment from the *author* or *subject* (rather than the characters). To the extent that identification between writer and reader is a prerequisite for persuasion, psychic distance is very rhetorical.

Now it's your turn to experiment with psychic distance. Revise this sentence so that it more intimately captures the experience of a cold day.

1. The weather is very cold today.
Your revision:

WHY PSYCHIC DISTANCE?

Psychic distance can help writers identify with and persuade readers. Arguably it has some advantages over these (also useful) terms:

- *Tone*, which can imply conformity to an audience's expectations, thus sacrificing authorial integrity.
- *Voice*, which can imply a neglect of audience, thus privileging individual expression.
- *Style*, which can imply excessive attention to the details of language, thus obscuring the Big Picture.

EXAMPLE OF PSYCHIC DISTANCE IN NONFICTION

From a student's rhetorical analysis of a local commercial space:

> Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to infiltrate enemy territory and conduct a thorough and covert reconnaissance of the area. You will gather intelligence on the physical layout of the compound and find anything you can about enemy tactics, techniques, and procedures. Due to tight security of the enemy perimeter, our only option is to send you in alone. Understand that if things go sour, we won't be able to conduct an extraction to get you out. Good luck—we're all counting on you!

> It was on this fateful day that I was about to go where no man had ever gone before—the secret stronghold of women: Victoria's Secret. However, I wouldn't be going in alone after all. I'd found someone on the inside; her name was Vanessa, and she had agreed to let me in quietly and serve as my cover throughout the mission. She was going to help me explore this commercial space so that I could find out how the enemy … I mean the customer … is

engaged by the store's marketing and selling scheme.

How Does Psychic Distance Translate to Multimedia?

Let's look at some examples.