

Reclaiming Digression

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We readers are travelers in good faith. We set out like Young Goodman Brown, of two minds, on the one hand tempted by our daring into the unknown territory of a book, and at the same time faithfully expecting to come back home without getting lost. Along the way we apply good-reader habits, traversing the whole by tracking our way across the linked elements. The reader expects that parts *will* cohere, since none of us survives as a reader unless we can go on. In short, the reader-in-good-faith expects to meet, not the devil, but a writer-in-good-faith. Yet our plan is always paradoxical because the adventurous reader secretly hopes for the unexpected appearance of that devil, imagination---what Bruner has called "effective surprise" ("Creativity" 18-23). Surprise is a sign that the imagination has intervened to steer us off the expected path, though whether the writer's or the reader's creativity is responsible for our willingly going astray remains moot, susceptibility to digression existing of course in both.

Thus the first hallmark of digression is its exceptionality. Something along the formally composed, carefully networked route of discourse takes hold of our attention, attracting us not by how adroitly it contributes to the development of the argument, for it is rarely an element of argumentation, but by how powerfully it arrests us in its own form, its own point, its own argument within an argument. Imagination is evident when we devilishly wander off to enjoy an element for its own sake and not for its immediate service to the larger work. Yet our readers' survival kit soon has us make less of it. We are challenged to make the usual sense of it, to treat it like just another quarter mile of text, to throw across a bridge no matter how makeshift.

To counter exceptionality, our unexceptional, routine skills as readers speed to our aid: we seek to establish bridges of form and meaning; to see causal connections; to reconcile unrelated elements; to construe a whole where subversive elements sabotage completeness; to reread an ambushed inference in the preceding paragraph; to undo an implication of contrast, so strong, perhaps, as to appear adventitious until we reread and recognize that the bedrock of similarities breeds the stoutest contrasts.

Everyone knows the masters of digression: Sterne, Trollope, Frost, Woolf, Swift, Montaigne, to name a few. Ah, we say, in his essay "On Cannibals" Montaigne digresses when he considers the deviousness of men of intelligence who, although they observe things more carefully, also

comment on them; and to establish and substantiate their interpretation, they cannot refrain from altering the facts a little. They never present things just as they are but twist and disguise them to conform to the point of view from which they have seen them; and to gain credence for their opinion and make it attractive, they do not mind adding something of their own, or extending and amplifying.

Hence, he suggests, we need as informant "either a very truthful man, or one so ignorant that he has not material with which to construct false theories and make them credible, a man wedded to no idea." The man who reports to Montaigne on the region in Brazil where cannibalism exists is precisely such an ignorant---and eminently trustworthy---man. Montaigne understands that he has made a lengthier than necessary detour; he is not so much establishing the credibility of his informant as he is aggressively seizing this point in his narrative to advise us about the credibility of all informants. For generalizing is an act of aggression. In fact, the connection between *digression* and *aggression* is often more than incidental; every digression violates the reader's habit and intent, at the same time that it fulfills the possibility of a rendezvous with the devil. Montaigne makes his exit from the digression unmistakable: "Now, to return to my argument" (108). At this point he introduces the central concern of his essay, which is that "we all call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits," carefully pointing out that the man "wedded to no idea" has with his own eyes seen that *corpSES* are eaten. Then he reasons with us that roasting and eating a body already dead is far less barbarous than the sixteenth-century practice "to roast it by degrees, and then give it to be trampled and eaten by dogs and swine," especially "under the cloak of piety and religion" (113).

How quickly, if at all, are we obliged to notice that our resilient attention has been led astray by an imaginative act? We trust Montaigne and read through the essay, our global response to the work owing as much to his impertinent digressions as to his central argument. Our response to the work of Montaigne is to both its logical and sub-logical elements; they combine to enlarge our respect for his enterprise (Haswell 406). Rather than denounce him as duplicitous, we relish his irrepressible mind, a mind incapable of reducing digressive thoughts to shadows falling across the main path, but which is instead driven to erecting digressive episodes in their entirety as landmarks. They call forth counter landmarks of the reader, which sprout up as a result of the reader's deviousness, antic thoroughness, individuality, concession, skepticism, openness, and charm---mirror images of the writer's own. In another sense, digression reveals the writer in that it re-creates the imagination of the writer in the reader.

In Hegelian terms the pleasure of art is born twice, once in the spirit of the artist and again in the spectator; Hegel says in his lectures on the Philosophy of Art that it is "essentially a question, an address to a responding breast, a call to the heart and spirit" (qtd. in Wallace 383). The experienced reader is therefore the flexible, imaginative reader who through digressive adventures enlarges his or her capacity to make meaning. The digression works "against" the form in the same way that a porch leans against a building for support, the broad, solid structure of the whole strengthening and embracing the appendage. But for the reader the digression has a good many more privileges. More than a literary veranda, it serves as a door, opening a way for the reader to enter the main edifice, linking the elemental nondiscursive and the orderly discursive. It belongs, in its

quirky subversiveness, even more than does the mainstream of the work, to both spectator's and artist's imagination. Ann Berthoff saves *imagination* "to name only the nondiscursive," and therefore agreeably uses it as the speculative instrument it is (67). Digression, as we know it, is precisely that, the speculative instrument of a speculative instrument.

As teachers, we are promoters of the speculative, for that is our calling, and we call to our service that other, even greater, instrument that speculates finely for the imagination, the dream. Dreams occur almost spitefully, as do digressions, without transitions or expressed logical relations. Freud has shown how dreams disguise what is important; the *manifest* dream makes a remote connection or a blurred connection to the *latent* dream content (168, *passim*). The writer's power like the dreamer's comes out of the unconscious, that dangerous, devilish, Hawthornian terrain. Profound psychic connections require intense work if they are to be uncovered. The first revision of a draft of writing often calls for "digression-work," just as the interpretation of a dream calls for "dream-work"; now the composition teacher, not the therapist, recognizing the gaps that exist between digressions and the "latent" content of a student's essay, questions the writer in such a way as to elicit connections and reconcile inconsistencies. The manifest dream, like the digression, "does not express logical relations.... It has no 'but,' 'therefore,' 'because,' or 'if' " (Fromm 71), and the pedagogic analogy to performing the "work" of the imagination applies; I have watched students discovering their unexpressed connections (Schor, "Revising: The Writer's Need" 116-24), and I sense that the same kind of energy that interprets a dream integrates a digression. A hot observation, an intensely felt qualification, a surprising juxtaposition of indwelling thoughts that resists logical connection, some previously held knowledge that impinges on a recent event either supporting or abusing the connection---these come to the aid of the reader's unconscious desire for art, the unconscious willingness to become the "responding breast."

The writer of the digression (a figure similar to the one Fromm calls the dreamer/spectator in a dream) (24-33) is often indifferent to the dislocations of logic and unembarrassed by his own theatricality. Readers are willing to be held in this embedded drama if the writer's narrative is only good enough to hold them. Digressors, like dreamers, have something of the exhibitionist about them; here is where censorship is cut away at the knees, for the reader, also like the spectator/dreamer, is no censor. The reader is greedy and willing to look with both eyes at whatever relationship comes his or her way.

What then *is* a digression? The digression is in itself an imaginative act. In the tradition of romance, digressive episodes make more urgent claims on the hero and on ourselves than the quest itself. Digression, even in speculative non-fiction prose, is dangerous, pleasurable, narcissistic. It unsettles the reader. It creates a new coherence by risking the available one for a limitless aside. In fiction it displaces the fictive world (we will deal with that notion again later). In both, digression is the outcome of rhetorical drives, easily tolerated in an oral tradition, to arrest and apprehend ideas hitherto unconnectable, an acting out of an unconscious indiscretion that is a kind of exhilarating free fall in an otherwise determined universe.

But digression is not error. It is not a substitute for what is proper or correct, like a slip of the tongue, but a supplement to what is whole and correct. Does it then become part of

the whole or does it stand outside of the whole? Do elements laid side by side without connectors, or those in Samuel Johnson's words "yoked together by violence," end asunder, or do those privileged by imagination drift finally and permanently into an embrace thus forever to remain in the reader's mind? If the metaphysical poets are any indication, Johnson's position notwithstanding, we have long since allowed the "violent" elements of a conceit to cool into art. Using Johnson's criterion of naturalness, we ask: Is the digression farfetched? Is it labored? Yet, digression is not metaphor. Metaphor can surprise us, he says in his dispute with the metaphysical poets, but it must be natural (22-31). Metaphor at its peak is so natural as to be necessary. It does not interrupt. It hurls the idea forward with its suddenly concrete and exact rendering. Its appeal is at once to intellect and feeling. Digression creates a rupture in the discourse for other discourse; that is, it is non-discursive but in a wholly discursive way. It has a natural, though not a necessary, relationship and is characterized chiefly by its detachableness rather than by its far-fetchedness and remoteness from the text, though they may exist. Finally, though it need not intensify feeling or appear miraculous as metaphor does, if a digression is not in itself interesting, it is nothing.

One would think that the threat of detachment were enough of a risk to discourage writers from digressing. And some are discouraged. In a discussion of digression in *Beowulf*, Adrien Bonjour says a digression "must have an element inappropriate or irrelevant to the main narrative." "An episode," he says, "is a moment which forms a real whole and yet is merged in the main narrative." A digression (his example is the passage on Hygelac) is "an adjunction and generally entails a sudden break in the narrative" (xiii). But true digressors digress, willy-nilly, for digressions speak their language: digressors are disclaimers, confessors, ironists, cynics, mind-changers, and especially reporters of facts. Consider, for example, "truth" breaking into Robert Frost's poem "Birches" "with all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm." Here is Frost's voice at its most accurate. A desire to make room for reality in the imaginative world is sufficient to justify digression. Mary McCarthy's essay "The Fact in Fiction" proposes that the inclusion of fact is not merely desirable; it is the stamp of the novel.

The distinctive mark of the novel is its concern with the actual world, the world of fact, of the verifiable, of figures, even, and statistics. If I point to Jane Austen, Dickens, Balzac, George Eliot, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, the Melville of *Moby Dick*, Proust, the Joyce of *Ulysses*, Dreiser, Faulkner, it will be admitted that they are all novelists and that, different as they are from a formal point of view, they have one thing in common: a deep love of fact, of the empiric element in experience. Most of the great novels contain blocks and lumps of fact—refractory lumps in the porridge of the story. [Some readers] skip these "boring parts" to get on with the story, and in America a branch of publishing specializes in shortened versions of novels---"cut for greater reading speed." Descriptions and facts are eliminated, and only the pure story, as it were the scenario, is left. But a novel that was only a scenario would not be a novel at all.

Are we to understand, at its simplest, that anything tangential to the narrative is digressive? Think of *Moby Dick* without the chapter on "whiteness," *The Magic*

Mountain without the passages on tuberculosis (McCarthy 250-51); or even Updike's *Roger's Version* without the opposing worlds of academic theology and computing.

As telling as McCarthy's essay is about "fact," it is just as telling about what we have been calling digression. Digression, with its sneer, arrogance, assertion of fact, forthrightness, nostalgia, and compulsiveness of the writer to reveal what she or he knows, uncovers reality as the writer yields to it. As I noted earlier, digression displaces the fictive world by nudging it into the real world. In Julian Barnes' novel *Flaubert's Parrot*, his factual "digressions" about Flaubert re-enact the narrator's marriage and his forays into biography. In the end, one must reread the work in order finally to put to rest the notion that biographical "digressions" interrupt the novel and affirm instead that we have been reading a complex and imaginatively constructed novel. Interruption and digression bring forward the imagination and displace our assumptions about the world of discourse.

If digressions belong to the whole work rather than stand outside of it, what is it that connects digressions to the main text? Can a given digression be slipped in anywhere? Do digressions generate an ironic comment on the text? In what manner are they detachable? In a discussion of medieval rhetoric and its link to sermons, I was amused to read that in Cicero's *Rhetoric*, "the 9th ornament is Digression, which is equivalent to Transition. It occurs when one proceeds artistically from one part to another. A reader of Cicero's *Rhetoric* can see that this is improperly called digression. If digression is considered as something incidental, it does not belong in a sermon. But the digression which we are discussing here consists of a certain skillful connecting of two principal statements by verbal and real concordance" (Murphy 353). Perhaps the connection between digression and transition runs deeper than Murphy's passage suggests. Cicero apparently has grasped the notion that the intention of a digressing writer is to connect parts through apparent deviations from the main trajectory, deviations that often deepen and extend the argument and provide a new understanding.

Digressive material finds its way in because the shape of the whole is constantly changing, owing to the persistence of free association, or the insurgence of unexpected and idiosyncratic similarity, or black/white contrast, or dozens of other unconscious seductions. The less structured a work, the greater our license as writers to digress and as readers to overlook displacement. Sub-logical connectors tie digression to the mainstream of the work. Strictly logical material has a greater freedom of movement within a work. If the parts are logical, logic and not order holds the parts. Recent research into cohesion shows that ties between parts also exist between remote sections of a text and are not necessarily limited to adjacent parts (Bamberg 418). Remoteness introduces the role of memory into the issue of digression. Remoteness refers not only to the remoteness of living experience and linguistic experience of the reader, but to "the way in which during the reading the reader keeps alive what he has already elicited from the text. At any point, he brings a state of mind, a penumbra of 'memories' of what has preceded, ready to be activated by what follows, and providing the context from which further meaning will be derived. Awareness---more or less explicit---of repetitions, echoes, resonances, repercussions, linkages, cumulative effects, contrasts, or surprises is the mnemonic matrix for the structuring of emotion, idea, situation, character, plot---in short, for the evocation for a work of art.... For the experienced reader, much of this has become automatic, carried on through a continuing flow of responses, syntheses, readjustment,

and assimilation. Under such pressure, the *irrelevant or confusing referents for the verbal symbols evidently often are ignored or are not permitted to rise into consciousness*" (Rosenblatt 57-58, emphasis mine). In other words, according to Rosenblatt, the experienced reader suppresses irrelevancies. I grant a greater degree of skill than does Rosenblatt to the experienced reader, who under the spell of an interesting writer is not at all passive, but drives collaboratively through material supplying relationships where none are explicitly stated and parlaying verbal impediments into literary possibility. The good reader does not get lost, for digressions, work of the devil though they appear, suspend the narrative; they elevate it, adding a steeliness to the stretched span, increasing the tensile strength of good discourse.

Consider that phenomenon known as the Zeigarnik Effect, named for the Russian psychologist who held that tasks interrupted are more likely to be completed and remembered than tasks not interrupted, especially when these tasks have a clearly felt structure (Bruner, *Toward a Theory* 119; Schor, "Alternatives" 48-51). Zeigarnik's psychological proposition refers to readers as well as to writers. The digressions in a well-focused piece of writing are not merely tolerated; they lend memorability and excitement to a work precisely because the reader is driven to overcome the digression from which he or she longs to return to the trajectory of the writer. It is another case of "plot as desire... prolonging the detour and more effectively preparing the final discharge" (Brooks 139).

But perhaps best of all, digressions have their own intrinsic value, memorable for what they impart and for the romantic drama that they stage between their own heady extravagance and the decipherment of the main text. Good digressive activity is inherently satisfying, but at the same time it creates two possibilities: first, digression destabilizes the narrative, driving writer and/or reader back to complete the text within the shape of the original structure, which has already taken hold; or, second, digression is a significant part of composing; it is embedded in the shape of what is being written, thereby changing it and offering both writer and reader a new coherence.

Still, as teachers we know that digressions have liabilities for the inexperienced writer. Liabilities often arise, not out of the failure of the digression, though that may occur, but out of the writer's inadequacy to render the reader committed to finishing the work. In the case of an experienced reader, when a digression undermines the unity of a piece, either the writer has lost his or her sense of proportion, or the intrinsic value of the digression outweighs the value of the main text. Confusion and distraction in the reader are attributed to weakness in the main narrative more than to the "flaw" of digressing. The writer must weigh such questions as these: Is the digressive passage too long, i.e., is it out of proportion to the scale of the whole work? Do I need to exit from the digression under a prominent transition? Does the tone or style of the passage conflict with those of the main narrative? If the digression is a kind of illustration, is it gratuitous, repetitive? Is the writer's thought pattern more visible than the argument itself? Would the reader's perception be significantly altered were the digression omitted? Or, to ask the question another way, does the digression fail to produce harmonious resonances? Does it fail to create a reciprocity of pressures by means of which words influence each other, floating like Chagall figures to breathe imagination into the whole work?

How, finally, can digressions widen our contributions as composition teachers? In those kinds of writing that are speculative and reflective (Hairston 445), we expect the

student's speculations to go beyond the rigors of form just as we expect them to go beyond the rigors of topic. The teacher sees into first drafts with special scrutiny and hope (Schor, "Revising: The Writer's Need" 123) for here is where the unconscious with its powerful span always operating, raises up a student paper, and here is where the teacher reclaims digression and its surpassing possibilities.

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