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On Asking Impertinent Questions

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for Ann E. Berthoff

Imagine you’re teaching a senior seminar on the essay. You begin with a self-reflexive assignment, the stock-in-trade of any experienced writing teacher who has been fortunate enough to have been trained to see the heuristic value of getting students to think about their own thinking. You ask the students to write an essay about the essay. The assignment strikes the students as strange and pointless, perhaps even vaguely insulting. How do you write about writing? Why would you want to?

They blink.

They go home and give it a try.

What is the essay for? Here are some of the answers you receive.

• The essay is for making an argument.

• The essay is for persuading someone to see the world the way you do.

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• The essay is for showing you’ve done the reading.
• The essay is a way for the teacher to test your understanding of the assigned subject.

All those years in school writing essays and not one of the students knows what the essay is really for. Not one knows the right answer. How could they all be wrong?

The essay can, of course, be made to serve many different purposes: it can be an argument-maker; it can be a testing device; it can be the staging ground for the dance of persuasion. So the students really aren’t wrong; they’re just showing you what the essay is routinely used for in school. But is there another kind of work that essays can be made to perform, work that both students and their teachers might find more intellectually rewarding to pursue? This is the question I wish to explore in what follows.

Every year, students who’ve excelled as undergraduates majoring in English think about giving advanced study a try. They take the GREs; they collect together their transcripts, their recommendations, their best papers; they write something variously called a “personal essay” or a “personal statement” about the issues, ideas, and texts they hope to spend the next many years thinking about. They make an argument for themselves.

This is one of those rare moments where student writing really does matter. The personal essay, bundled together with the other institutionally recognized documents, works to try to jimmy open the door leading to advanced study. Members of admissions committees then pore over these documents to see whether the argument is a credible one; they consult with one another and with the faculty at large about borderline cases; and then they make their final decisions and produce a ranked list naming those applicants who should be given a shot at being members of the following year’s entering class.

Once the department has made its commitment, the rhetorical situation changes, with the work shifting from ranking students to recruiting them, a shift that requires that the department make a case both for itself and for the profession. But how do you convince prospective graduate students that it re-
ally does make sense to think about devoting one’s life to working with words? Do you talk about the role that the essay will come to play in their lives—those stacks and stacks of student essays that extend over the years to the horizon and beyond? Or do you stick to more alluring images: the teacher at the lectern, the joys of office hour mentoring, the life of the mind?

In my department, our recruitment effort includes hosting an annual open house, where prospective students are invited to hear a panel of faculty members discuss an academic essay that has been selected by current graduate students. It’s an opportunity, if you will, for the prospective students to see the life of the mind in action, to get caught up in the hurly-burly of institutionally produced deliberations. For this brief moment, the selected essay, plucked from all the possible essays one could imagine, assumes central importance for the local community; its concerns become the community’s concerns; its terms the coin of the realm. When you’re inside such moments, the writing under consideration can seem imbued with supernatural powers, able to produce and provoke exchanges that range from the thoroughly predictable to the thrillingly unanticipated, with the give and take among those present taking on the aura of lasting importance. When you’re inside such moments, the reading and writing of essays can seem to be the most important work in the world.

Is it ethical to engage in persuasion of this kind? As the academic job market has eroded, soul-searching deliberations about the business of recruiting students, long held in whispers behind closed doors, have moved out into the open and now regularly appear on the programs of the profession’s national conferences and in the pages of the profession’s most prestigious journals. And so it is now common to hear academics wondering aloud if we’re doing the right thing when we encourage hopes of professional success when we know in advance that these hopes are only likely to be realized by the smallest percentage of candidates for advanced degrees in the humanities.

My department has responded to this problem in ways that are exemplary: prospects are informed about the realities of the job market in our orientation materials, so that, while they are making their decisions, they have concrete data on completion rates, time to degree, percentages of students placed in tenure-track positions, and a list of schools where our graduates have found employment over the past decade. And the current graduate students, aware of the kind of exceptionalism that can govern the reading of such data, themselves recently contributed to the effort to make certain that, prior to starting graduate school, the next cohort of prospective students seriously reflected on this question of how one justifies the pursuit of a life working with
words, by selecting Elaine Scarry’s “Beauty and the Scholar’s Duty to Justice” as the essay to be discussed at the open house.

This, then, is how Scarry’s essay came to my attention. Chosen by the local community, the essay served to convene a local discussion about teaching, writing, scholarship, beauty, justice, and the future of the profession. Scarry’s essay gave us something to talk about.

Introduction. Conclusion. The works cited page.

Is this what makes an essay?

Let’s pretend for the moment that these component pieces of the essay are supremely important, that attending to them is the best way to get at what the essay is and what it is best used for. We might say, in so doing, we are pretending to work in a tradition of writing instruction that has prevailed in high schools and colleges across the land for more than a century. Let’s see what happens to the activity of reading when these formal aspects of the essay are emphasized.

For the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in 1999, Edward Said, that year’s president, invited Elaine Scarry to join a featured panel on the role of “social responsibility and commitment” in the literary professions. Scarry responded to this perennial question about the lasting utility of scholarship and research in the humanities by providing an abbreviated version of the argument that lies at the heart of her book On Beauty and Being Just; she argued, in short, “that a commitment to beauty or creativity is inseparable from a commitment to justice” (“Beauty” 25). Scarry’s case for the relationship between beauty and justice begins with this assertion: “I take it as a given that the central social responsibility of a teacher is to teach and, if possible, to teach well” (21). Scarry likes this idea so much that she repeats it almost word for word two paragraphs later, as if her intervening paragraphs on beauty and the imagination had transformed the claim of her introduction into a reasoned conclusion. Whether claim or conclusion, though, what does it mean to describe teaching as a “social responsibility”? That is, why is teaching linked first and foremost to “social responsibility” rather than, say, economic necessity or obligation; why not say that teaching is, before all else, something we get paid to do and that the governing assumption of this economic relationship is that this is work that we will do well? What are we to make of Scarry’s reluctance—a reluctance that is also felt throughout the pro-
fession—to think about the work of teaching, even the work of teaching the reading and writing of essays, as a job?

By drawing attention to the working life of teachers, these impertinent questions serve the important function of derailing the seemingly irreversible journey toward the familiar conclusion to which Scarry’s essay seems determined to take her readers—that place where we can rest easy in the knowledge that teaching writing is teaching beauty is teaching justice, that place of reassuring illusions. As I see it, Scarry’s central task in “Beauty and the Scholar’s Duty to Justice” is to recruit others to the profession she has joined, and the best way to do that is to begin with the unchallenged assumption that teaching is a “social responsibility.” Come, she says, and fight injustice, injury, and irrationality; come and help others experience the powers of the imagination, of beauty, of research. The fate of the nation is there waiting to be shaped by the hands and the minds of scholars and journalists, she believes, if only we can find a way to work together. Like those Marine ads that run during football games, where the recruit crawls through a flame-filled tunnel, squirms past murderously spinning blades, leaps out to slay some fiery beast, and is then bathed in the light of acceptance, Scarry’s essay aims to enlist future scholar-warriors to the author’s cause by depicting the labor of teaching and scholarship as centrally concerned with the exciting, morally exhilarating cause of fighting injustice wherever it shows its face. Who wouldn’t want to heed the call to serve such a cause?

The conclusion to Scarry’s essay isn’t quite as exciting as what preceded it, though. While Scarry has used the body of her essay to treat her readers to stirring images of scholars who battle nuclear holocaust and famine with one hand while holding a pair of opera glasses with the other, she closes with the strange declaration that “the humanities need to return not only to celebrating beauty and the imagination but also to teaching scholarly research within the classroom,” a process best begun, she tells us, by teaching “the use of footnotes to make both transparent and available the paths of evidence that lead to the argument, an argument in which something actual is at stake” (30).

The footnote?

Having spent nearly twenty years as a writing teacher, including the past seven helping to administer a writing program that serves more than twelve thousand students a year, I am predisposed to see writing instruction both as essential to the mission of the university and as work that is routinely undervalued by the academic community at large. Even so, far from taking pleasure in Scarry’s suggestion that the cause of justice and beauty might be advanced
by teaching the footnote, I found this conclusion to be something of a let-
down. After having lifted us to the intoxicating heights of theory, after putting
us face to face with the most extreme forms of social injustice and arguing
that contemplating beauty serves as an invaluable resource for discovering ways
to right these manifest wrongs, Scarry abandons her readers to the writing
classroom, leaving us with the thoroughly mundane work of training others
how to check their sources.

Letdown or no, it is curious that Scarry’s claim about the central impor-
tance of the footnote appears in an essay without any footnotes.1 What we can
learn from the scholarly apparatus Scarry does provide in her bibliography is
exactly what one would expect from a well-prepared argument: aside from re-
ferences to recent work by Noam Chomsky, Said, and Scarry herself, the bibli-
ography is otherwise dominated by works published early in the nineties, a
citational practice that explicitly supports Scarry’s central contention that the
version of scholarly duty she is calling for has been only infrequently realized
in the past decade. Indeed, the bibliography reveals that Scarry’s showcase
text of the way scholars can contribute to the fight for justice by exposing
a hitherto unknown “source of injury”—Nobel Prize–winning economist
Amartya Sen’s Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation—
was published over twenty years ago. While this is, as I’ve said, exactly as one
would expect in an essay that argues that the recent exiling of beauty from the
academy has resulted in the unintended banishment of scholarly work com-
mitted to justice, I find myself worrying over the implications buried in Scarry’s
bibliography, implications her own insistence on the primacy of footnotes has
bid me consider.

Although I’d like to be counted in the ranks of those scholars who are
seen to have a deep and abiding appreciation both for justice and for beauty, I
find there’s no silencing these questions. They are the product of a writing
teacher’s mind moving across the grain of the essay, nothing more; they are
situated, local responses, generated by a given reader at a given time (and so,
like the essay itself, as I will argue shortly, of no lasting value):

• Is the fact that Scarry cites so few contemporary examples of scholars
producing work that serves the cause of justice proof that work of this
kind is now truly rare, or is it a sign of a research method that is flawed
or biased or both?

• Is it significant that none of the work Scarry cites as admirable has
been done by scholars who teach at public universities?
Is there a connection between Scarry’s institutional location (she’s a professor at Harvard), her reading habits, the company she keeps, and the particular direction her argument takes?

Is it possible that it is easier to think about teaching as something less like a job and something more like a duty when one is employed as a professor in the Ivy Leagues?

Whether or not such questions are “fair,” these are versions of the types of questions that range through the minds of those on the verge of committing themselves to a life devoted to working with words, questions that concern not just the circulation of ideas, but the circulation of people as well. In her featured talk and the essay that followed it, Scarry has chosen to give her auditors and then her readers a glimpse of a life of the mind that is lived by only the smallest fraction of the profession—a life of endless speaking engagements, of listening to Said lecture one night on social responsibility and on Mozart’s Così Fan Tutte the next, of reading Plato and Hobbes, Orwell and Rawls, of contemplating truth, beauty, and justice. And in so doing, she has set out to reenchant the labor of scholarship for a profession weary of the cultural wars and of talk about political correctness by drawing a picture of a way of life enriched both by deep encounters with beauty and by meaningful work to extend the reach of justice in the world.

Who wouldn’t be attracted to such a life?

But what if the life that lies ahead for the vast majority of those entering the profession will look nothing like the one Scarry depicts? For most of us who work as teachers of writing and who, therefore, are destined to spend the bulk of our professional lives reading essays no one else will ever see or think about for even a moment, our jobs offer a decidedly different menu of daily activities than those catalogued in Scarry’s essay. Rather than list those activities here, I’d like to extend our reading exercise for just a little longer by doing what writing students around the country are trained to do when handed a piece of academic prose: I’d like to focus on the essay’s concluding paragraph. Here, in their entirety, are Professor Scarry’s closing remarks:

I have presented here my sense of my duty to justice, my sense of the four impediments that restrict us in carrying out that duty, and my sense of the changes
within the universities—the return of beauty, the return of the imagination, and the return of research methods—that might assist us in overcoming those impediments. (30)

This is, to be sure, a conventional enough way to end a piece of writing, with a summary of the main points that have been made in the preceding paragraphs. But, one might ask, why follow this convention? Must all essays go down this familiar path? The most rudimentary instruction urges that the essay is best organized in three easily recognizable parts: there’s the intro (say what you’re going to say), the body (say it), and the conclusion (say what you said). Where does this commonplace understanding of how writing should unfold come from? What’s the appeal of making writing an endless exercise in redundancy, where the essay circles forever around the same point, saying the same thing over and over again, forever leading in the same direction, in the same way? Obviously, Scarry didn’t invent this way of writing; she’s just swimming along with the discursive tide. But where would one look if one wanted to find the source of this kind of writing? How would one set about generating a topographical map that traced out how the deep ruts and troughs of academic discourse have been formed?

One promising place to begin research of this kind would be with James McCrimmon’s Writing with a Purpose, one of the best-selling composition textbooks of all time, first published in 1950 and now in its fourteenth edition.2 Over the past fifty years, this textbook has been used to introduce hundreds of thousands of first-year writing students to the conventions of academic discourse. In fact, when my colleague Kurt Spellmeyer and I recently visited the corporate headquarters of McCrimmon’s publisher, Houghton Mifflin, we got a glimpse of just how important McCrimmon has been to the industry. Toward the end of our tour, we were guided to the “McCrimmon Room”—a large, high-tech conference room, complete with a bronze likeness and a plaque listing McCrimmon’s many professional achievements, all to express the corporation’s debt to this man whose work has defined the writing experiences of so many students for so long. Our visit concluded with a stop at a more typical homage to the power of writing: we were walked past the CEO’s office so we could behold that holiest of holies—Nathaniel Hawthorne’s desk. In terms of who has had a more powerful influence on the writing of undergraduates in the second half of the twentieth century, it’s a pretty easy call: the textbook author towers over the literary giant, the exercise writer over the artist, mundanity—some might say—over beauty.
It is easy enough to account for the incredible success of McCrimmon’s text: *Writing with a Purpose* makes the messy, inconclusive, meandering work of writing essays into a tidy, easily managed business and it has accomplished this transformation by advancing a series of seemingly inarguable propositions about the best ways to go about putting together an effective piece of writing. First, you pick your subject, then you analyze your audience, then you determine your purpose for writing, then you create an ordered and balanced outline, then it’s draft, revise, refine, and you’re done. The building block for all this work is, of course, the paragraph, and so it is important, throughout the writing process, to continually audit the effectiveness of the paragraphs that make up the introduction, the body, and the conclusion, checking each for effectiveness. McCrimmon would certainly give Scarry high marks for her concluding paragraph, since it “emphasizes main points in a summary” (xx). Whether writers opt for this type of conclusion or one of the other two McCrimmon discusses, the ultimate goal, McCrimmon informs us, is to “leave a reader with a sense of completeness, a conviction that the point has been made and that nothing more needs to be said” (xx).

Really?

This is one way to understand the work of the writer, but I would like to suggest that there are other, more productive ways to define this work. Indeed, I would say it is the teacher’s job—job, not duty—to assist students in learning how to use their own writing to think new thoughts. Of course, writing that isn’t simply rehearsing what is familiar to the author and fashioning arguments already acceptable to the imagined audience doesn’t arrive either as polished or as well-organized as the bloodless examples that McCrimmon embraces—examples of writing designed to be rapidly skimmed and assessed. While the reasons writing teachers would promote the production of student essays that can be read without much thought (Intro? check; body? check; conclusion? check; outline? check) have as much to do with working conditions and professional training as they do with pedagogical preferences, we shouldn’t let this prevent us from entertaining the possibility that the essay might be profitably conceived of in the following ways: as a means for slowing thought down; as a technology for generating reflection; as a practice of entertaining other possibilities than the ones that seem the easiest to defend and substantiate; as a way to explore issues of such seriousness and importance that one never reaches that point where “nothing more needs to be said.”

It is easy enough to underestimate the importance of training students to use their writing in these, perhaps counterintuitive, ways. Indeed, in many
circles, particularly those where teaching is not understood to be a job but as something akin to a duty or an act of charity, escaping the company of beginning writers and beginning students is considered the first sign of genuine professional success. But we could just as well draw on the central term in Scarry's argument about the scholar's duty to justice to say that the abandonment of undergraduate education in writing to part-time lecturers, teaching assistants, and instructors who have teaching loads twice as heavy as the tenure-stream faculty involves a profound failure of imagination by the institution's most privileged members, one that puts the needs of the institution and the needs of the teachers themselves before the needs of the students. Is it possible for students to learn about beauty or justice in such a system?

There are, of course, alternative educational models, ones which strive to provide students opportunities to gain greater access to the powers of the imagination. Indeed, if we return to the case of Amartya Sen and ask how it is that he came to develop his lifelong commitment to exploring the relationship between economics and social injustice, we find that, by Sen's own account, this commitment was forged not through the perception of beauty, as Scarry's argument would lead us to believe, but from his having attended a secondary school that the great poet Rabindranath Tagore had established in Santiniketan. It was at this school, Sen says, that

my educational attitudes were formed. This was a co-educational school, with many progressive features. The emphasis was on fostering curiosity rather than competitive excellence, and any kind of interest in examination performance and grades was severely discouraged. ("She is quite a serious thinker," I remember one of my teachers telling me about a fellow student, "even though her grades are very good.") Since I was, I have to confess, a reasonably good student, I had to do my best to efface that stigma. (Par. 3)³

Armed with this training in the arts of curiosity and a determination to be a serious thinker, Sen set off to Presidency College, where he studied from 1951 to 1953. There, Sen goes on to report,

[t]he memory of the Bengal famine of 1943, in which between two and three million people had died, and which I had watched from Santiniketan, was still quite fresh in my mind. I had been struck by its thoroughly class-dependent character. (I knew of no one in my school or among my friends and relations whose family had experienced the slightest problem during the entire famine; it was not a famine that afflicted even the lower middle classes—only people much further down the economic ladder, such as landless rural labourers.) Calcutta itself, despite its
immensely rich intellectual and cultural life, provided many constant reminders of the proximity of unbearable economic misery, and not even an elite college could ignore its continuous and close presence. (Par. 10)

Sen has been haunted ever since both by the suffering he witnessed during these years in India and by the failure of the academic community to create a viable space for thinking and learning where solutions to such profound social and economic problems could be explored. Indeed, as Sen sought to figure out how to make sense of the results of his own research, which showed that famine is caused not so much by the absence of food as it is by a failure of political will to see to the fair and equitable distribution of the food that is available, he was surprised by just how little support for this thesis he found from his fellow travelers on the left:

[D]espite the high moral and ethical quality of social commiseration, political dedication and a deep commitment to equity, there was something rather disturbing about standard leftwing politics of that time: in particular, its scepticism of process-oriented political thinking, including democratic procedures that permit pluralism. The major institutions of democracy got no more credit than what could be portioned out to what was seen as “bourgeois democracy,” on the deficiencies of which the critics were most vocal. The power of money in many democratic practices was rightly identified, but the alternatives—including the terrible abuses of non-oppositional politics—did not receive serious critical scrutiny. There was also a tendency to see political tolerance as a kind of “weakness of will” [...] (Par. 11)

It was against this educational background that Sen found himself first working on the project Scarry so rightly admires. With Sen's narrative in mind, we might well conclude that it is the scholar's duty to promote just the kind of educational environment he has described—an environment where curiosity is rewarded, pluralism respected, and process-oriented political thinking encouraged. In such learning environments, I would argue, it is the teacher's job to provide students with vivid experiences of the mind ever working at the limits of its own understanding.

Or, to put this another way, we might say that we must understand that what resides at the core of the writing process is the experience of being wrong. This is always the case, whether we recognize it or not. A problem, a topic, an idea presents itself and the writer, in trying to get a handle on the subject,
simultaneously transforms and malforms what is being written about. Assumptions, biases, past histories, agendas, pressing current needs, context, ignorance willed and unintended: everything works together to distort the subject being investigated into something manageable and familiar; everything colludes to reduce the complexity, to cover over the contingent character of the conclusions and the insights, to construct the learning itself as not a process at all, but always a fait accompli. But how can students learn if they are never allowed either to see others learn or to experience themselves learning? How can learning happen, in other words, if being wrong is always presented as a defining characteristic only of beginners or, at higher levels, evidence that one doesn’t belong?

Wonderfully, as it turns out, Elaine Scarry places “being wrong” at the very center of her book, On Beauty and Being Just. Indeed, as Scarry responds to the prompt that launches her book (recall a moment when you made an error about beauty), she finds in her examination of her own failure to acknowledge the beauty of palm trees that “the experience of ‘being in error’ so inevitably accompanies the perception of beauty that it begins to seem one of its abiding structural features” (28). As Scarry recounts the shift in her perception of palm trees as big, ugly, and quite untreelike to her appreciation of the palm’s ability to filter and create a kind of “leaf-light” (47), she documents how this discovery reveals beauty to be “sacred,” “unprecedented,” “lifesaving,” and finally, and most importantly, an experience that “incites deliberation” (23–28). And so, this experience of being wrong is essential both to the experience of beauty and to the pursuit of truth: “The beautiful, almost without any effort of our own, acquaints us with the mental event of conviction, and so pleasurable a mental state is this that ever afterwards one is willing to labor, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction—to locate what is true” (31).

Scarry is well aware that this argument can be traced all the way back to Plato; indeed, in insisting that this experience of beauty leads to a commitment to justice, Scarry is quite self-consciously asking her readers to return to an older conception of the teacher as the selfless defender against injustice, a conception that has been pushed aside, she believes, by the exiling of beauty from the corridors of academe. While I remain wholly unconvinced that the experience of beauty necessarily leads to a search for a lasting, enduring truth, I do believe that Scarry has made an important contribution to the discussion of the value of the humanities by shifting attention, as she has, to the necessary role that error plays in the process of seeing the formerly fallen world as
beautiful once more. Had Scarry not been persuaded by the Matisse paintings that lined the walls of her study one dreary winter to reconsider her own past judgments about palm trees, to see palm trees as, like everything she has “always loved,” “fernlike, featherlike, fanlike, open—lustrously in love with air and light” (16), she might never have asked the humbling question that comes unbidden to all those who see with such clarity that their own ways of thinking have made the world an uglier place: “How many other errors lie like broken plates or flowers on the floor of my mind” (17)?

If discovering errors in judgment about the physical world is an essential part of the process of coming to see the physical world as more beautiful than one had originally thought, what about errors in judgment about other matters and other realms? Do such errors have the potential to make the world a more beautiful and, perhaps even, more just place? While Scarry claims that it is “a strange feature of intellectual life that if you question people—‘What is an instance of an intellectual error you have made in your life?’—no answer seems to come readily to mind” (11), the truth is that beginners, amateurs, and life-long learners have no difficulty whatsoever generating multiple examples of such errors: indeed, for struggling students, the intellectual plane may appear nothing more than a vast expanse for storing experiences of being wrong, a place where the only thoughts one encounters are: I didn't understand this word, that sentence, this paragraph, that idea, this move, that argument, this requirement, that condition, this grade, that comment, this ritual, that performance. For those who work at the gateway to the university, it is not at all uncommon to encounter students for whom the entire experience of education is about one thing and one thing only: being wrong. And, of course, there are other students for whom the ultimate goal of education is to successfully fashion for themselves the public personae of individuals who have never been wrong, students for whom learning is an entirely private matter carried on behind closed doors.

While it is a commonplace to argue that the role of the humanities is to teach such students how to think, read, and write clearly and critically, we move onto much more fertile intellectual and pedagogical grounds if we imagine our responsibility as teachers to be collaborating with one another and with our students on creating a learning environment where errors in judgment are understood to be an essential part of the life of the mind. Thus, with
Scarry’s thesis in mind, we must ask ourselves if we can ever hope to foster a deeper, more enduring sense of and commitment to either beauty or justice if we refuse to allow students to produce writing where they are wrong, sometimes even spectacularly wrong. Can we ever hope to provide students with an incentive to become lifelong learners without allowing them: to make claims they can’t substantiate, to argue positions that need to be retracted immediately, to spend weeks trying to support insights that finally collapse under the weight of all the counterevidence?

This is, ultimately, what the essay is for: it provides an arena for learning the contours of one’s own thoughts; it opens up an uncharted, endlessly changing landscape where one is free to explore the limits of one’s own understanding. And so, if an essay’s sails can’t be filled with bluster and balderdash, if an essay can’t be whisked off course by a series of impertinent questions that subsequently get reconsidered, rephrased, and even rejected after further reflection, then the essay as it is written in the schools will never become anything more than the most convenient genre for determining whether the students have done the readings, listened to the lectures, reached and repeated the foregone conclusions. But if, as writing teachers, we allow for, anticipate, and accept the essential role that being wrong plays in the learning process, our pedagogical practices can become the place where we lay the groundwork for a learning environment that values creativity, a place where students are given access to the pent-up powers of their own imaginations and then directed to bring all their mental abilities to bear on the most pressing social, political, environmental, and economic problems of the day. A place, in other words, where students might actually have a chance to explore the relationship between the experience of beauty and a felt commitment to justice, between the world in here and the world out there.

As writing teachers, we have trouble facing the fact that the vast majority of what gets written goes unread, gets read and then forgotten, or ends up being forgotten even as it is being read. To insist that the best writing is the writing that stands the test of time, though, is to miss the supreme value that resides in writing’s inevitable evanescence: in a world awash with writing, writers are free to use the essay as a vehicle for exploring the moment in all its situatedness; free to explore the connections that suggest themselves; free to generate, test, and reject theories to explain whatever subject is under discus-
sion; free to write one essay and then to start all over again with the next one. And this, finally, is what it means to live the life of the mind: to forever put yourself in the position of encountering your own ignorance.

Whether one is a beginning writer or a highly recognized figure in the profession, the ways to trigger such encounters are the same:

- Question your own pieties, challenge your own most deeply held beliefs, refuse your own most cherished assumptions.
- Read material by those with whom you disagree, then read some more, asking yourself throughout to find the reasonableness in the opposition and the unreasonableness in your own position.
- Read outside your field and outside your discipline, learn about the narrowness of your own line of questioning as you learn about what other questions might be posed, questions that your training prevents from occurring to you.
- Use the essay itself as the staging ground for determining the limits of your own understanding, write yourself to the edge of your own certainties, test the explanatory value and significance of your own insights.
- Ask yourself this question about whatever you’ve written: who cares?

The writing that results will be wrong more often than it is right, but the generation of such writing—the daily practice of seeing how you see the world—is essential to the process of learning to think thoughts that are new to you.

Was I wrong to focus only on the introduction and conclusion of Elaine Scarry’s published talk on the relationship between beauty and justice? It all depends, I’d say, on how you judge the performatve aspect of this essay, which is much less concerned with Scarry’s work than it is with how our profession goes about the business of teaching, reading, and assessing the merits of the essay. Scarry’s the pretext, the McGuffin, the occasion.

The argument is elsewhere.

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The truth is that no piece of writing can withstand the withering attention of a close reader; all essays reveal their cracks and fissures, their blind spots and their prejudices, under such relentless scrutiny. And so, when we train students to use their writing only to record their own discoveries of such faults, when we bid them only to engage in the generation of critique and never ask them to consider the consequence or the significance of their discoveries, we prevent them from experiencing the essay’s productive powers. And, in this respect, Scarry is a particularly compelling example of a writer who has learned how to break free from the alluring security of critique to use her writing for the much riskier work of constructing a more inhabitable future. In light of this, it is essential to note that what I’ve discussed here is actually only an instant in Scarry’s intellectual career. She is much better known for having written *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, an extraordinary book which courageously seeks to explore an experience that seems to exist at the very limit of language—the experience of pain. And, more recently, Scarry has turned her truly formidable research skills to the project of investigating the final minutes of American Airlines Flight 77 on September 11, 2001. In “Citizenship in Emergency,” Scarry examines transcripts from the only plane not to hit its target on that infamous day and builds a timeline that tracks the military’s ineffectual response to this imminent threat from above to argue against the current program of national defense, which is “increasingly outside the citizenry’s control,” and for a civil model of national defense, one that is “distributed and egalitarian” (xx). These are both remarkable pieces of work, products of a sparkingly intelligent mind, wholly committed to thinking about and arguing for concrete ways to make a better, more just world.

What brought Scarry to her consideration of the central importance of the experience of beauty was her desire to understand the origins of her own deeply felt commitment to building a better world. In effect, what Scarry has done is to use the form of the essay to do precisely the kind of work I have been calling for here: she has sought to make sense of her own experience; she has written at the edge of her own understanding; she has generated explanations that have implications not only for the world in here, but the world out there. She has not reached the conclusions her own questions and her own investigative path have led me to, but that, too, is precisely as it should be, if one conceives of the essay, ultimately, as a noncoercive technology for prompting deliberation.
Is there a virtue to being wrong?

Scarry has helped us to see the central role that being wrong has to play in creating a sense of an ever-unfolding world, a world whose innumerable beauties are there waiting to be discovered, if we can just teach ourselves to see in new ways. From this it follows that to restrict access to the experience of being wrong is to forever seal the doors that lead to beauty’s transformative powers.

And as it goes in the realm of beauty, so it goes in the realm of writing: the transformative powers of the activity itself are made manifest at the moment you discover you have made a judgment that you yourself then determine to be wrong. There can be no real learning without such moments; the very life of the mind depends on an endless succession of such moments; and the best educational practice, as I have argued here, provides the training necessary to see these moments of being wrong as opportunities to explore further the richly complex, highly textured, ever unmanageable world that swirls around and within us all.

Is this an argument for joining the profession?
For committing to a life working with words?
For an approach to the teaching of writing?
You be the judge.

Notes
1. Perhaps incongruously, Profession, the MLA’s journal devoted to presenting the current preoccupations of those who make their living teaching others the language arts, has a house style that discourages the use of this type of scholarly apparatus.
2. Joseph Trimmer took over the project as sole author and editor starting with the thirteenth edition.
3. All quotations are taken from Amartya Sen’s autobiographical statement upon being awarded the Nobel Prize.

Works Cited
An Impertinent Answer

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I have read Richard's essay, "On Asking Impertinent Questions," several times now and asked myself why I didn't like it when I first read it as an anonymous reviewer for CCC. Now, after about the fourth time through, I still don't like it, although it's hard to say that about an essay written by someone who is extremely well-known in the field and whom I personally respect and like. In addition, I am in sympathy with his theme—or at least with one of his themes. What irks me—and what made it impossible for me to read Richard's essay with any pretense of objectivity—are the implications of the ideology he suggests we should lean on in our attempts to recruit promising graduate students into our field. There is also a tone in the essay that complements Richard's theme but makes me grit my teeth—perhaps because I see more of me in the essay than I want to.

When I first read "Impertinent Questions" without knowing who the author was, I was impressed by the writer's style. It is the style I aim for—smooth and easy. I could hear his phrasing. It reminds me of Frank Sinatra. I particularly appreciated Richard's ability to make complex ideas available to readers like me who get irritated by the academic tendency to use five-dollar words for ten-cent ideas. I was also drawn to Richard's theme, which on the surface is an argument for replacing a somewhat mindless adulation of quasiformulaic argumentative writing with a sharper focus on the reflective essay. Beneath this

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