

FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 18 | Spring 2014
www.forumjournal.org

Title	I am a Cliché
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue Number	18
Issue Date	Spring 2014
Publication Date	30/05/2013
Editors	Victoria Anker & Jessica Legacy

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I am a Cliché

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I am a writer. Being comfortable saying this is taking me a long time. While I wait for that day to arrive I revisit some of my old work. I find it full of clichés and feel embarrassed by its naivety and simplicity. This is the story of my development as a writer. This is the story of my increasing ambivalence towards academic writing

I am a Cliché

During my early twenties I wrote a lot: poems, short stories, letters to friends and family. Then I stopped. I became disheartened. I felt there were already so many words “out there” in the world – in the form of books, essays, newspapers, websites, blogs – that I could not possibly add anything. In a world so full of words, is it possible to say anything worthwhile, I asked myself. So I simply stopped writing. I threw out all my old journals and notepads, two boxes full of them. My love of words slowly began to dwindle – I read less and less.

A few years passed in this way, but after returning to university I began writing again. I finally decided that what I wanted to do, what I had always wanted to do, in fact, was be a writer. Not just any old writer, but a good writer, perhaps even a great writer. Having come back to the idea of writing I set about finding ways of improving and developing my style.

“Any one who wishes to become a good writer should endeavour, before he allows himself to be tempted by the more showy qualities, to be direct, simple, brief, vigorous and lucid”, states Henry Fowler (qtd. in Heffer 222). This sentiment is repeated throughout the guidebooks I have consulted. It is a mantra, repeated over and over and over, repeated across multiple texts by multiple authors, repeated and emphasised and underlined: “Use the active voice” they tell me; “prefer shorter words and sentences to longer ones” they command; “strive to seek clarity and avoid ambiguity” they implore.

Armed with this advice, I look back over some of my past writing, most of it academic essays, to see how it fares against this critique. I am surprised and embarrassed by what I find.

I read the introduction to my undergraduate dissertation, a piece of writing 611 words long, arranged across eight paragraphs, and find that the word *analysis* (or *analyse*) occurs ten times. The words *explore*, *scrutinise*, *investigate* and *propose* also make multiple appearances. I tell the reader that it is my aim to “investigate and illuminate aspects” of the problem at hand and that I will “examine and consider” the topic under discussion. Almost every sentence contains a word or phrase of this kind.

I take a deep breath and peek inside the cover of another essay, this one peer-reviewed and published. The introduction is a similar length to the previous one – 602 words over seven paragraphs – but this time the

verbs *elucidate*, *expound* and *posit* are most frequent. I find that it is my aim to “question the notion of”, “highlight the fact that”, and “elucidate basic truths of” whatever it is I am trying to say. Sweeping statements, banal and uninformative, also abound. “Various philosophers, over many centuries, have developed theories relating to the notion of self” I tell the reader, without divulging the philosophers I have in mind or how they relate to my ideas.

As I finish reviewing a third essay, I decide I have had enough: three essays, three introductions and a slew of similar-sounding scholarly verbs. I need a break.

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Helene Cixous believes that “the general trend in writing is a huge concatenation of clichés” (119). A depressing thought for someone who longs to be a writer. And there is more bad news to come: “this is our problem as writers. We who must paint with brushes all sticky with words. We who must swim in language as if it were pure and transparent, though it is troubled by phrases already heard a thousand times” (Cixous 114). Our brushes are sticky with words, Cixous believes, because we are always everywhere preceded by language, surrounded by words and phrases that have, over time, become common (Cixous 150). Is this perhaps what has led me to feel so despondent about the lack of originality in my own written work?

If I am at all concerned with the idea of originality I need to understand this word, “cliché”: what is a cliché and how can I avoid them? I am not even sure if I need to avoid them, but before deciding I need to know what they are. This proves harder than I imagined because there is no consensus on exactly when a popular phrase becomes a cliché. Sir Ernest Gowers, for example, thinks that what makes a cliché is “partly a matter of opinion” (87).

Despite the lack of agreement, George Orwell believes that clichés are often used unthinkingly and lead to a form of writing that involves no writing, no actual application of the writer’s craft. Not only will clichéd words construct your writing for you, they will also “think your thoughts for you,” proclaims Orwell emphatically (113). Even Marjorie Garber, who adopts a more balanced attitude towards linguistic clichés by emphasising their potential for condensing complex ideas into a short space, agrees that overused language “substitutes for thought” (qtd. in Sword 114).

As a slightly different approach, I buy a book that deals specifically with academic writing, laying bare the common tropes so that writers will know what to avoid. As part of her research Helen Sword reviews a thousand academic articles and comes away with very clear ideas of what is clichéd in academic writing – technical, jargon-laden language, heavy use of abstract, Latinate words, verbosity, pomposity, lack of clarity. While I cannot be sure if things are really the way she describes them, I decide to test her claims against some of my previous work.

When discussing the general language used in academic writing, Sword states that authors often write “paragraphs in which nearly every sentence either has an abstract noun as its subject (‘this study,’ ‘the observation’) or, thanks to grammatical sleight of hand, no named subject at all (‘it can be seen,’ ‘the patients were examined’)” (35). She finds that “these two phenomena – the ‘research as agent’ sentence and the ‘agentless’ sentence – occur so frequently in academic writing that both constructions can often be found cohabiting in a single paragraph” (37).

It does not take me long to find sentences of this kind in my work. As an example I present a paragraph taken from my undergraduate dissertation, written on the subject of speech, language and thought:

This essay will, therefore, propose a new critical perspective on these works, one that involves the use of philosophy. In doing so, it will be seen that both focus on the notion of self, whether by conscious decision on the part of the artist or not. (Williams)

This paragraph contains both of the common features Sword describes. In the first sentence I project my agency onto the essay itself by declaring that it, the essay, will be proposing new perspectives on the two works of art previously named. In the second sentence the question of agency is altogether buried by the phrase “it will be seen”. By whom will it be seen? Presumably by the reader of the essay, but if this is the case why do I not just say it, rather than hiding behind language I would never normally use?

Until recently I had no idea my writing was like this. Having now realised, I wonder how it came to be so. I think back to a time a few years ago, a time when I was particularly influenced by the opinion of others.

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I do not understand fully, yet I remain silent. I sit there taking in everything that is being said, filled with an eagerness to please as much as an eagerness to learn, not really putting anything that is said into doubt, but instead diligently taking notes and nodding in agreement every so often. For an hour I sit there, with the words of the speaker continuously demanding my attention.

I am one of perhaps twenty people occupying a small room. We are third-year undergraduates, most of us mature students in our late twenties or early thirties, but we feel like four-year olds who, taking their first lessons in pre-school begin to scribble their own names with hands they can barely control. The final drafts of our dissertations are due for marking in little over a month’s time and everyone is anxious, worried that there is not enough time to turn their initial attempts into finished pieces, polished and perfected.

Presently we are being told that our essays should not contain the first person present participle, “I”. We are being told in no uncertain terms that phrases such as “I suggest that...” and “I think that...” should be completely erased and replaced by phrases of the form “it can be argued that...” Trusting the speaker completely, I take this piece of advice and apply it to the next draft of my work.

Why is such writing encouraged? Perhaps it is because those “who write highly subjective, first-person prose run the risk of sounding unprofessional and self-indulgent” (Sword 43). As an example of this kind of prejudice, Susan Brison describes the problems she faced publishing a philosophical text on the subject of trauma, a text written in the first person and concerning her *own* story of rape survival. As further evidence of this bias Brison reveals the story of a writer who was told by her older mentor that a text concerning women’s place in academia was not “real professional work” because she had written it from a first-person perspective (28).

Sword and Brison have been a revelation to me. They have taught me that there are others who think, as I now do, that many commonly-held clichés are needless, that there is no legitimate reason why a substantial, well-researched, well-argued, piece of academic work cannot be written from a first-person perspective.

One does not have to search far for well-respected academics who write in the first-person.. A great example is Douglas Hofstadter. Reading *I am a Strange Loop* while on holiday, free from the usual pressures of work and formal studies, I began to formulate my ideas for this essay. I would, I thought to myself, try to

include personal anecdotes to illustrate what I feel is wrong with the things I have been taught. For, as Hofstadter believes, “we communicate best when we exploit examples, analogies, and metaphors galore, when we avoid abstract generalities, when we use very down-to-earth, concrete, and simple language, and when we talk directly about our own experiences” (xv).

While he does believe this is the case, Hofstadter also explains that he made the choice of writing in the first person rather than taking the “standard academic route” (xvii). But surely the two are not mutually exclusive? Surely the above examples prove that it is entirely possible for the standard academic route to include personal narratives written in the first person? And not just the above examples – a host of others could be given.

I get the feeling Hofstadter is fighting a corner that does not need fighting. Perhaps he is even working against the cause he claims to support, since giving emphasis to the two paths – the standard academic route and his less formal “I”-focused approach – as separate paths may act as a force driving them apart. Rather than simply writing in the way he wishes, his active pronouncing of it serves to create a split between his approach and others’.

Sword encourages writers to experiment and Hofstadter provides an example of what can be done. Both are easily accessible and because of this, widely read. Perhaps their approach will itself soon (if it has not already done so) become clichéd. Without doing further research I cannot be certain whether what Sword says is true, but what I can be sure of is that my work tends to follow certain patterns.

One pattern that recurs in my work is the frequent use of words like *describe* and *examine*. My titles, though I put a lot of time and thought into them, follow an altogether different pattern: an eye-catching opening gambit, often direct or paraphrased references to pop culture (the title of this essay, for instance, is from a song by the punk band Xray Spex), followed by a more prosaic, strictly functional second part stating succinctly what the essay is about.

My undergraduate dissertation, for example, bore the title *I am, Speaking: The Philosophical Notion of Self and its Connection to Language in Art*. Other titles include the ponderous *Going With the Flow: A Comparison of the Themes Within Martin Heidegger’s Being and Time and Joris-Karl Huysmans’ With the Flow* and the Slim Shady-inspired *Will the Real Slavoj Zizek Please Stand Up: Interrogating Zizek’s Methodology*. The list goes on, with title after title and subtitle after subtitle.

My first attempt at a title for this essay was *I am a Cliché who Lives Next Door: A Self-Critique leading to a Study of the Common Clichés in Academic Writing*. To break from my standard approach I shortened this to *I am a Cliché who Lives Next Door*, believing it becomes obvious as the reader progresses that not only is this a self-critique, but also a study of clichés in academic writing.

Not being totally happy with this shortened version, I thought back to Strunk and White’s instruction that “a sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences” (15). Looking at my title I realised that *I am a Cliché who Lives Next Door* does indeed contain more words than necessary. I thus shortened it further to read simply *I am a Cliché*. Every word does a job and that job is not hampered by the paucity of words.

With the title in place and filled with enthusiasm for the subject, I could begin writing. But nothing is ever as simple as that and I find beginning an essay very hard. My texts tend to start very slowly, building up

pace as they proceed. About half way through I start to feel more comfortable, the words flow more easily and I have a greater sense of what I am trying to achieve. I believe, without any real evidence, that most writers probably have a similar feeling.

Maurice Blanchot goes one step further in his thoughts of a beginning, believing that a text is always beginning and never begun. Despite this, I (as most readers probably do) open the text on the first page and carry on in a forward fashion from there. What confronts me on the first page sets the tone for what is to come: it can be enticing, drawing me further in, or it can do the opposite, firmly shutting me out. Opening Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, I straight away find this statement: "It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it heats, it eats. It shits and fucks" (1). To give another example, equally at odds with the accepted standards of academic writing, I quote from the opening sentence – a sentence that seemingly never ends, stretching as it does beyond the first page and well into the second, with clause after clause in the additive style – of Jean-Francois Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*:

Open the so-called body and spread out all its surfaces: not only the skin with each of its folds, wrinkles, scars, with its great velvety planes, and contiguous to that, the scalp and its mane of hair, the tender pubic fur, nipples, nails, hard transparent skin under the heel, the light frills of the eyelids, set with lashes...(Lyotard 1)

And on it goes. It is fierce and challenging, yes, but beyond this Lyotard is making a point about his intentions as a philosopher. With this picture of a body cut open he is neatly setting up his materialist theory of libidinal intensities and graphically portraying a Moebius strip, where inside and outside blend. Now, imagine he starts the book by writing: "it is my intention in this book to present a philosophy that ..." I know which book I would rather read.

Compare these two examples to the opening sentence of my BA dissertation: "This dissertation pursues an analysis of two works of art that are, each in their own way, centred on the production of language" (Williams). Aside from the point made above about ascribing subjecthood to the essay, there is something else wrong with this – it is a dull sentence. The essay may very well pursue some kind of analysis, but who is going to take the time to get beyond that unpromising first sentence? It just does not grab the reader's attention in the same way as the previous examples.

The openings of my essays are something I have tried to work on as I have developed as a writer, having been helped along by several open-minded tutors. One such tutor encouraged me to rethink my MA dissertation, which was at the draft stage, with the statement "you have some great research here, now go and *write* something". Without being able to explain exactly what he meant, I got it straight away. And if there was any doubt left in my mind after this, it was destroyed by his next words: "have fun with it". Others offer the same advice. Kingsley Amis and William Zinsser both insist that if a writer enjoys the writing, the reader is sure to enjoy it also (Amis 222; Zinsser 160).

The result of all this was that the first sentence of my MA dissertation became the far less stale, "While entertaining some of his friends at a dinner party, one of the guests presented the young Jacques Lacan with a logical puzzle to solve" (Williams). This oft-repeated anecdote (I have no idea of its truth) concerning the particular Lacanian text I was writing about made an interesting way to begin my essay. I proceeded to paint a picture of the young psychoanalyst entertaining friends: wine flowing, the guests, increasingly inebriated, all

trying to outsmart the others. In doing so, I also managed to introduce a complex Lacanian thesis without resorting to: “I begin this essay by introducing the complex Lacanian thesis of ...”

According to Helen Sword, many options, both for the start of an essay and for an essay as a whole, are available to the writer who would seek them. She suggests that would-be writers look to novels and plays for possible means of organising their writing, giving the example of Virginia Woolf, who used pictures and doodles to map out her books. While some writers build whole texts around a single theme or metaphor, others chose to unveil their ideas gradually, as if writing a murder mystery novel (Sword 129). Below I give three examples of writers working in my field – philosophy – who have unusual or distinctive writing styles.

Though Friedrich Nietzsche is famous for using aphorisms, his work is in fact far more varied, ranging across poetry, aphorisms, both long and short essays, and novels. He uses so many different structural forms to avoid being dogmatic, the very thing he accuses past philosophers of being. He is caught in a bind – he wishes to say something about philosophical thought but at the same time is unable to say it directly for fear of being a hypocrite. His answer to this problem is his style of writing (Nehemas 4). His system of thought therefore becomes a fight to avoid having a system, or at least to avoid having a single unified system.

Slavoj Žižek says he finds it impossible to write (Žižek!), a strange statement for a man who has written more than 50 books in the last 25 years. Opening any of these books at any page, one is soon confronted by a torrent of pop culture references, jokes and puns, all written in a style that jumps from one thought to another with extreme speed. With this method of “looking awry” he hopes to render visible parts of Lacanian theory that would otherwise go unnoticed, claiming that repetition of the same material helps bring out the subtle changes in emphasis over time (Žižek 3). The focus of much of his writing is the Lacanian *Real*, a concept that is very hard to define or pin down. Žižek’s approach is designed to indicate possible readings of the Real, first from one direction, then from another, and so on.

Helene Cixous has a rhythm and style that is unique; she describes it as a fleshy writing, one that comes from inside her body. Many of her books are semi-autobiographical, about her relationship with her mother and father, her upbringing, her place in the world. She mixes this fictionalised autobiography with a philosophy of writing that has much in common with that of Jacques Derrida, often conflating character positions, as in *Promethea*, to highlight the fragility of the relationship between self and other (Blyth and Sellers 47). This question of self and other, attempting to have relationship with the other while at the same time maintaining its status as other, is an important one in modern philosophy and Cixous approaches it from a personal angle. In her youth she lived in Oran in Algeria, but not in the French part; she lived in the ramshackle “native” part of the city. She was not accepted by the French as she was not part of their world and she was not accepted by the Algerians as she was an outsider, “other”.

These are examples of writers for whom the text’s form plays a vital role in communicating their ideas; the texts are, in a sense, practical examples of what they are attempting to describe. Each writer has developed a style of writing that fits his or her overall thesis. As I do not yet have a fixed and stable thesis that I am working towards, I find it hard to know what approach or writing style I should be using.

Having come this far, I now pause to reflect on this essay, rather than any previous ones. What am I trying to do here? I am trying to put down in essay form my current thought process regarding academic writing.

Opening a dictionary I find that the word *essay*, as well as meaning a piece of prose writing, also means “a test or trial” (Collins) or “an attempt” (Oxford): to experiment or try out new ideas, in other words. Indeed, to write is, according to Mireille Calle-Gruber, to surprise, to discover, to open and to blur, but also, she suggests, to *be* surprised, *be* discovered, *be* opened and *be* blurred (Sellers 207). This leads me to reconsider what an essay, this essay for instance, is or can be. Instead of being the end point of a thought process, the laying down of thoughts that have already occurred, perhaps writing is a part of that thought process, “thinking on paper” (Zinsser 149), or “writing what you cannot know before you have written” (Cixous 38).

For Barthes, the pleasure – the joy, the ecstasy – of a text is associated with the contradictions within it, its duplicity and complexity. In the pleasurable text, one can be met with abrasions and discomfort, perhaps being allowed only glimpses, as if the writer were a striptease artist, the text a titillating plaything (Barthes 10).

The works of Helene Cixous typify this kind of writing; they remain ambiguous, contradictory. Hers is a writing that accentuates possibilities, rather than shutting them down, a writing that seeks to reveal complexities with subtlety, “touching the mystery, delicately, with the tips of the words, trying not to crush it” (Cixous 134); it is a writing that tries not to fix meanings or form strict concepts, leaving things free, on the verge of appearing and disappearing. Words move with ease between one meaning and another, retaining the initial meaning even while they absorb or take on another. Writing thus becomes, for Cixous, a search for multiplicity of meanings and outcomes for her and her readers (Blyth and Sellers 24).

Because there is such a play of words (they can take on any number of meanings and can exist in any number of combinations), a text can never be finished or come to a stop. Each word and sentence can be unravelled forever. This is what leads Jacques Derrida to state that “the idea of the book, which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing” (18). Likewise for Maurice Blanchot, for whom a written work “is a torn unity, always in struggle, never pacified” (219). This open-endedness and lack of totality in language is completely contrary to the feelings I had when I gave up writing – it gives me hope that some form of originality is still possible.

Taking a look at some of the names I have mentioned, I realise now how much I enjoy “difficult” writing. Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Helene Cixous, Gilles Deleuze – I struggle to get to the end of their books, struggle to understand them once I have, and struggle to articulate that understanding, to myself and others. I toil and toil, glimpsing meaning every now and then, briefly, only to have it stolen away again by authors who seem wilfully, almost impishly, obscure. But, perverse as it may seem, I take great pleasure in this.

And so I am led to think about their writing. What it is they are doing with language, language that they use, for the most part, to speak about the function of language – language describing language? Why do they construct such long and complicated sentences, use such obscure terminology, and risk alienating their audience?

The arguments for and against clarity have a long tradition in academic circles. Michael Warner believes the “difficult” style of writing employed by certain writers was developed as a catalyst for social and political change: a new writing to bring about a new world. The aim was to disrupt the status quo by avoiding the “normalising” effect of everyday language. As Warner puts it: “the apparent clarity of common sense is corrupt with ideology and can only be countered by defamiliarization in thought and language” (111). However, who is to say that this new language is not equally corrupt with ideology, albeit of a different form? And what

happens if this new language itself becomes “normal”, as perhaps it has done. Is a newer new language then required?

Martha Nussbaum counters Warner’s point of view by arguing that the work of such politically-motivated writers, having little or no readership outside of academic circles, does not reach enough people to have any impact (Culler and Lamb). However, as time has progressed, the claim of obscurity has become an argument in its own right. In other words, while obscurity was once thought to be a vice because it lessened the political impact of writing, now obscurity is simply seen as something to be avoided, the reason for this having been lost (Warner). Thus the argument has become diluted from “this writing is obscure and that’s bad because ...” to “this writing is obscure and that’s bad”.

Others suggest that it is simply laziness or lack of interest in the subject that causes readers to give up so easily. Jonathan Culler, for instance, wonders “who has failed to do serious intellectual work” when Judith Butler is accused of, and even wins an award for, bad writing (45). This argument is itself thoroughly lazy and fails to deal with the question of why the writers feel it necessary to write the way they do. Putting the blame on the reader for not being persistent enough in no way exonerates you if you have produced a piece of bad writing; bad writing is bad whether your readers manage to get through it or not. For the argument over clarity and obscurity is really, at heart, a question of what makes good or bad writing.

This is the question I am looking to answer, have been looking to answer from the very beginning of this essay. While some theorists are level-headed enough to keep the notions of style and quality separate (Brooks 130; Murray 183), others passionately and pedantically stick to their side of the dispute, each putting forward their position with over-used, clichéd words.

Amid these arguments I am lost, not really knowing what to make of it all. My ambivalence towards academic writing is perfectly summarised by this quote: “I want neither to subscribe to dominant current practices in academic writing nor to endorse the generally mindless critique of them. I find it difficult to come to rest in any one position” (Brooks 129). I do not have an answer, only a desire to continue writing, try out new ideas, possibly fail, find other paths, get lost, find my way again.

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As a post-script I will add that writing this essay has helped me decide in which direction I want to develop – I have recently begun writing a short, creative piece for a different academic journal. I am enjoying experimenting with a new style (new for me at least) that is more akin to the later work of Samuel Beckett than any writer mentioned above. Incorporated into the minimal and abstract environment of this new piece are ideas by Lyotard, Marx, Deleuze and others, but the writing does not bear any relation to an academic text, even of the most experimental kind.

While this essay concerns my thought process, the structure and presentation of it have been thoroughly considered. In my future writing I would like to see how far it is possible to move away from a linearly structured and fully explained work while still maintaining that work as a piece of academic writing. Can fictional works, poems, short stories, fables, jokes be taken seriously as academic writing? Can disjointed, stream-of-consciousness, meandering writing, a current thought, captured at the moment of its appearance and noted down just as it is?

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Author Biography

Since graduating from university I have been trying to write a book, though it feels like I am mostly just wasting time, simply breathing in and out, waiting to die. A pause, during which I write this article, then silence.