Some Thoughts on *Expressive Discourse*: A Review Essay

Peter Elbow

I'd like to take this occasion to share my observations on Jeanette Harris' *Expressive Discourse* (Southern Illinois UP, 1990) and, in doing so, to express some thoughts about the nature of expressive discourse itself. Harris has written an ambitious and interesting book that covers a vast territory in composition. Her argument is that we should

give up on the concept of expressive discourse, acknowledging that it is virtually meaningless because it is so poorly defined and that it is probably poorly defined because it is not a real category. In place of one ambiguous, all-inclusive category, we could then analyze the types of discourse presently classified as expressive and identify them by terms that are commonly accepted or that are sufficiently descriptive to be used with some precision and accuracy. (49)

She uses her book to propose and explain terms or categories to substitute for "expressive discourse." In doing so, she also creates a rich model not only for the process of writing but also for the process of reading.

Some of Harris' substitute terms refer to things that occur in time as we write and read. The "interior text" refers to what is in the writer's mind before (and during) writing. The "generative text" refers to any of the various exploratory words and drafts most writers put on paper before getting to the final draft. Finally, there is the "text" itself—that final draft, finished, or finished for now. She applies the same terms to the reading process: first, readers read the finished text itself, then they sometimes make written notes while reading and thus produce a generative text, and either way they end up with the interior text—that is, their mental representation of the written text.

Harris' other replacement terms refer to different kinds of writing rather than different events in the process of writing or reading. First, she distinguishes "pragmatic" versus "aesthetic" discourse: discourse trying to make something happen in the world versus discourse intended to be enjoyed in the reading or for its own sake. She also distinguishes between "experience-based" and "information-based" discourse: "writing that derives from the writer's own experiences . . . first hand" as opposed to that writing which is "extraneous to the writer's own experiences" (64). She explains and summarizes her whole argument in her first few chapters and then goes on to devote
one chapter each to exploring her replacement categories in greater detail. Her final chapter focuses mostly on pedagogical implications.

**Mapping the World of Expressive Discourse**

I need to sound a personal or expressive note at this point. Because I will voice some substantial misgivings about this book (along with substantial respect), I need to make it clear that I didn't go out of my way to review it. Two journals, in fact, sent me copies and asked me to write a review. I naively accepted the first invitation before reading the book, thinking, "Why not? I'm interested in expressive discourse and have to read this book." I thought the job would be easy and pleasant, but I've had a struggle with this review. There is much I see as reasonable, interesting, and useful in Harris' book, yet I often sense a lurking edge and even animus in it and often find myself bothered and resistant. "But wait a minute," I often had to say to myself, "maybe the only reason you get itchy or annoyed is that you have a personal stake here." Harris, you see, gives me prominence as a promoter of expressive discourse and of what she calls expressive pedagogy or "rhetorical expressionism," and I'm not happy with how she represents me. I've had to fight my way to a sympathetic reading that shows the book's virtues. In effect, I've found it helpful to play the doubting game and the believing game with the book.

I didn't start out resistant. When I first discovered, thumbing through the book, that she wanted to get rid of expressive discourse as a category in our discipline, I was intrigued—even attracted. Not just because I don't find the word "expressive" particularly central to my own lexicon, nor just because I too sometimes wonder what the word means, but most of all, quite frankly, because I find these days that the term is mostly used as a stick to beat me over the head with. My hopes were dashed, however, when I found that she is only trying to get rid of the term "expressive discourse" but that she wants to keep the terms "expressive pedagogy" and "expressive theory" and "rhetorical expressionism" for people like me—for the general school of thought that Berlin gave that label to. Unfortunately, she seems to want to hang onto the term "expressive" so that she too can continue to beat "expressivists" about the head and shoulders.

That is, even though she takes a kind of detached judicious tone throughout the book—proposing in a disinterested stance simply to get rid of inaccurate terminology or confusing categories—her treatment of people interested in personal or expressive writing seems to me so polemically distorted as to belie her stance or voice. Here is how she sums up the work of the "rhetorical expressionists" (naming James Britton, William Coles, Lou Kelly, Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray, Donald Stewart, and me):

The rhetorical expressionists viewed writing not as a rhetorical act or a practical means of communication but as a way of helping students become emotionally and psychologically healthier and happier, more fulfilled and self-actualized. (28)
Although she makes a qualifying statement that people like us sometimes take "increased skill in writing and clear communication" as "indirect goals," her conclusion is that "such an approach clearly precludes any emphasis on content or skills as essential elements of good writing" (27-28). These are not stray comments on the fringe but are, in fact, the central statements in an amazingly short analysis of the so-called expressive movement—presumably the main foundation of her book.

It seems to me that if someone is going to focus a whole book on a particular intellectual movement, he or she has an obligation to understand it and to present it more accurately and in more detail—not just look at it through an inverted telescope as an alien threat. Berlin was trying to take a satellite snapshot of the whole composition globe and wasn't much interested in that region he oversimplified and unfortunately labeled "expressive." But Harris is trying to zoom in and take a close-up picture or draw a careful map of just this one region, and so I cannot help asking that she be able to see it a bit more carefully and accurately. After all, she prominently announces that the entire goal of her book is to get rid of inaccuracies that stem from false or oversimplified categories.

Thus, I became an itchy resistant reader early in my reading and noticed things like the following.

She sums up the entire medieval period as follows: "During this lengthy period of history there was little interest in individual emotions or experiences. . . . The work of artists and writers primarily reflected Church dogma" (5-6). Can she really be imagining actual readers when she makes a claim like this, readers who have actually read more than cursorily in the medieval period? Consider Chaucer, especially Troilus and Criseyde. She allows herself other similarly reductive oversimplifications of history or cultural change—the kind of statements that see history as a battlefield where disembodied "isms" and "fields" are the causes of everything that happens (as in notes from a survey lecture course). Thus:

Empiricism contributed to the perception that an individual can discern knowledge through his or her senses, idealism asserted that one can discover the nature of reality through introspection or a knowledge of self; phenomenology emphasized a subjective apprehension of physical reality; and existentialism assumed there was nothing beyond the self. (10)

Another pervasive influence on rhetorical expressionism is romanticism. [She is not summing up a full analysis of romanticism or a story about real people, this is it.] (29)

Psychology [in the nineteenth century] has, in effect, given credibility to emotion, elevating it to equal status with cognition. [No one believed in emotion till the field of psychology came along?] (13)
I don't see much hope of overcoming the tendency of literary scholars to condescend to the field of composition till composition scholars stop using canned intellectual history—until they, for example, stop summing up Plato or Aristotle in just a few sentences from a secondary source as Berlin does. Even when it comes to the meat and potatoes of composition issues, Harris permits herself this remarkable generalization: "Professional writers usually have well-defined writing tasks and do not need to discover and narrow a topic or to explore their feelings" (96). These are not just oversimplifications hastily created for decorative background filler; they are central building blocks of her argument. She speaks in passing of how ethos is a matter of tone of voice, not considering how much it is produced by the trustworthiness of information and thinking.

The Dangers of Expressivism?

What helped me get past a resistant reading was to realize that the book has, in fact, two different arguments or projects: the first argument is against the term "expressive discourse," and the second is against the thing itself; the first is theoretical and has to do with how we describe and classify discourse, and the second is practical and pedagogical; the first is prominently announced as the object of the book, occupying most of the writer's direct attention, and the second is kind of slipped in—at points almost denied. Most important of all, Harris implies that her first argument about categories logically entails her second argument about practical pedagogy—whereas I cannot see any necessary connection. Thus, the two arguments or goals of the book get tangled up in each other, with the second one undermining the effectiveness of the whole enterprise. Let me explain.

Whenever Harris talks about the goal or purpose of the book, she implies a kind of disinterested concern with greater accuracy and precision in the scholarly task of describing and classifying discourse. Again and again she protests that she is not trying to wipe out expressive discourse. And she does indeed find ample place in her scheme for everything that the term has stood for; in fact, she provides much more semantic space with her replacement categories than the term expressive has usually occupied. On several occasions she even expresses a strikingly genial or accepting position about the "personal" and "expressive" dimensions in writing:

Discourse that is based on both experience and information has the advantages of both: it communicates information derived from other sources as well as the writer's own experiences and ideas but is marked by the writer's personal style and voice rather than the anonymous sterility that frequently characterizes discourse that is based exclusively on information. (187)

Yet, the book seems to me equally dominated by the impulse to push away expressive discourse itself. A couple of remarks made only in passing
serve to signal that Harris actually sees an enormous danger in expressive discourse. She notes two threats. First, she implies that many teachers or theorists think expressive discourse is inherently "superior" to other kinds of discourse: "As long as we continue to think of experience-based writing as expressive discourse, a type of writing that is considered superior to other discourse, we are not giving students an accurate perception of how mature writers and readers construct a text" (166). I can't see how even enthusiasts like Britton, Murray, and I can be read as saying expressive writing is "superior." Yes, Britton argues for more of it, but it's because he finds only five percent of school writing to be expressive. (I would grant that he confuses things by using "expressive" to stand for all exploratory writing, even if it is writing that explores in a detached way the options in a geometry proof.) But none of these things amounts to calling expressive discourse "better." It seems odd or quaint to call one kind of discourse inherently better or worse than others; yet, at times it is she who drifts in that naive direction:

Some teachers are beginning to question the validity of an approach that encourages narration and description as ends in themselves and that does not require students to attempt more challenging writing tasks in which they must make rhetorical choices about audience and purpose, internalize and synthesize information from other sources, discuss abstractions, formulate and articulate ideas based on their own observations and generalizations, and learn to use invention strategies that go beyond simply recalling past experiences. (176-77)

Fiction or nonfiction narrative/descriptive forms are lower, unrhetorical, unthoughtful species of discourse? (It is true that many people say that writing with some personal investment or voice in it is better than "anonymous sterility." But, of course, this is exactly what Harris says, quoted above, so she can't be calling this opinion a threat or danger.)

She sees a second danger in expressive discourse—not just as a type of writing but as a process. That is, she implies that expressive discourse is taking over the teaching of writing and that many teachers and theorists want to assign nothing but writing about personal experiences, not writing about information, data, or ideas:

However in recent years, the balance between these two broad purposes [pragmatic and aesthetic discourse] has frequently shifted toward aesthetic because of the emphasis on expressive writing. Since literature is vaguely perceived as expressive, many composition courses are largely devoted to teaching students how to write literary discourse . . . Because composition is so often perceived as the stepchild of literature, it is not easy to establish the equality of pragmatic discourse in the composition class. (185)

This too seems to me an unrealistic fear. I get to see a lot of writing courses and writing programs, and I don't know any that call for nothing but expressive writing about one's own personal experiences. (I suppose that what we really have here is an amusing intersection of competing paranoias:
she sees "expressivists" taking over the world, while I'm more fearful of the anti-expressive movement taking over the world. But I hope I've never resorted to calling pragmatic discourse "unworthy" or "inferior.")

It's not that Harris is trying to get rid of all expressive discourse, but she asserts among the conclusions of her book ("Conclusions and Implications" is the title of her last chapter) that writing teachers should cease certain pedagogical practices that she sees as central to the expressive tradition. First, though she says she approves of a prose style that mixes experienced-based and information-based discourse (187), she concludes that teachers should not invite or allow students to write about their own experiences unless these experiences are brought into an "information-based" enterprise involving reading or research that brings "information derived from other sources" (187).

Second, she concludes that students should not engage in writing "without any plan for developing these into more structured texts but merely to give the students additional practice" (183). That is, she says students should never write as an exercise—as freewriting, for exploring, for warming up, for following our noses—with, to my mind, all that this practice entails of discovery, surprise, lowered stakes, and opening up of style and voice. She admits that "writing-to-learn" exercises might be useful in a subject matter course, but the goal of such exercises is to learn subject matter, not to improve writing; therefore, they don't belong in a writing course.

Third, she inveighs against inviting students ever to believe that they could write for an audience of self. She bases her position on a piece of a priori reasoning—namely, that she cannot conceive of writing that is not for others:

Even though in an earlier draft of this book I combined writing-for-self with writing-in-progress, what I now term a generative text, I later came to the conclusion that the two were not the same, not only because one is a form of text and the other a type of discourse but also because I can conceive of no significant instance in which a writer does not think in terms of a possible audience. (66)

She has, it is true, the grace to hedge on this matter: "It is conceivable that certain writers may have mastered the art of writing-to-discover to the extent that they have no thought, at least no conscious thought, of an audience" (68). But she ends the discussion (and other discussions of private writing) with a universal conclusion that implies there are no questions about this matter: "Writing-for-self does not exist in any real sense. . . . Ultimately all discourse is intended for an audience other than the self who is doing the writing" (68-69).

In the end, I cannot see how her theoretical model bolsters her pedagogical preferences, how her main argument about theoretical categories of discourse and text entails her prescriptions against pedagogical practices she calls "expressive," despite her implication that it does. Translating this to a
personal level, I finally realized that I could allow myself not only to get intrigued but even attracted to her theoretical model and still not have to renounce all these practices that she thinks don't exist or that I shouldn't use in my teaching and my writing: writing for an audience of self; writing wholly about one's own experience; freewriting and exploratory or exercise writing that is not meant to be developed into a more structured text or finished product. Her interesting categories of discourse and her illuminating model would work fine to help the profession see and talk more clearly about all these disputed practices; they would provide us with good tools even if we want to argue for them. Her model of discourses makes a perfectly comfortable place even for the species of discourse or behavior she calls nonexistent—writing only for the self—for there is nothing inherent in her model of generative text or text itself that entails her personal belief that they are always for readers other than self.

I find, therefore, that once I untangle the troubling subtext I have no difficulty giving an interested and respectful reading to her main enterprise. Let me focus on it for the rest of this review. I will question some points she has made, but I think it will be clear that I am airing these questions not out of a wish to criticize but out of my own genuine uncertainties and in order to communicate better some of the interesting cruxes in her proposals. In every case, I feel grateful and respectful about what she is proposing in this major dimension of her book. Her proposed terms or categories not only clarify my thinking, but in the last analysis I think she might be right. I end up torn.

Some Key Questions

Harris does indeed show how theorists have allowed the term "expressive discourse" to slide all over the map. Besides the more obvious meanings, we see people like Kinneavy saying that all discourse comes from an expressive impulse, people like Britton saying that expressive discourse is the matrix from which all other discourse comes, and a frequent tendency for people to talk of all literature as expressive. I guess I have a few hesitations about whether this means we actually have to get rid of the term, or can, for what she herself calls the "core" meaning is strong and clear: "One of the few stable criteria for describing expressive discourse has been its subjectivity—the idea that it reveals something about the person who created it" (145). Thus, it might make more sense simply to define the term that way and then go on to acknowledge that there have also been certain other extreme or ambitious definitions that we would do well to recognize as special senses of the term. After all, not many people seem to use the word "expressive" for a rough messy disorganized first draft of a grant proposal or a description of the organizational structure of a company just because it is a rough, messy, disorganized first draft—so long as it is primarily factual and detached. Conversely, not many people seem to deny the term expressive to a piece of writing that is very personal, subjective and full of the affect, persona, self, or
alleged self of the writer just because it has been cannily crafted and painstakingly revised through seven drafts. What is inner or prior or careless is no more inherently expressive than what is outer or later or careful.

Nevertheless, despite these hesitations, I am persuaded by Harris not only that “expressive” is a slippery term but that more than most words in the discipline, it has become a site for ideological mud-wrestling. In the end, I’d love to go along with her clear-the-decks instinct and simply tear that page out of the dictionary—so long as she’s willing also to tear out “expressive pedagogy” and “rhetorical expressionists.”

Besides, she doesn’t have to kill off “expressive” as a term to make way for her new categories; they are remarkably sturdy and useful on their own feet. They are much more precise and practical, and, in addition (and I particularly appreciate this), they are sophisticated and complex. That is, avoiding boxes or pigeon holes, she makes it clear that these different “kinds of discourse” are really abstract or theoretical end points on various continua rather than fully stable discernible entities. She acknowledges that actual pieces of writing always exist at some point along the continuum between two ends (though she insists that one type or another usually predominates). She sees these continua operating in various dimensions: pragmatic discourse is not always information-based but it can be experienced-based too; conversely, aesthetic discourse is not always experience-based but can equally well be information-based. She acknowledges that few of these kinds of discourse can be identified by actual textual features: aesthetic and pragmatic discourse are distinguishable by the purposes to which the texts are put (not by actual features of the texts themselves); experience-based and information-based discourse are distinguishable by the building blocks they make use of, not the rhetorical purposes these blocks are used for.

I struggle a bit with Harris’ distinction between “aesthetic” and “pragmatic” discourse. On the one hand, I have always found this distinction from Rosenblatt to be useful. Harris handles it carefully, as Rosenblatt does, emphasizing that the issue is the subtle one of how a text is being used (by reader and writer) rather than of unambiguous identifiable features themselves. (William Stafford provides the paradigm example. He had a beautiful calligraphic “No Smoking” sign in his office that deterred a friend from smoking; but when Stafford happened to refer to it as a poem, the friend immediately lit up his cigarette.) And yet, on the other hand, this central distinction in her book—that aesthetic discourse, “like all art, even bad art, exists for its own sake”—surely flies directly in the face of one of her other emphases: the centrality of the rhetorical view of language. She happens to quote Wayne Booth in this chapter, yet did he not make a convincing case that even works of art are rhetorical, are attempts to do something to people, never merely for their own sake, and are thus pragmatic—and this not just “by the way” but as central to their being? It is true that she struggles with and hedges this distinction, but in the end she insists on it.
I feel Harris pulling in two directions in her treatment of interior text. On the one hand, she insists on the “closeness” or “relatedness” between interior text and final text. That is, using the metaphor of “embryo,” she insists that the interior text carries the genes or eggs of the final text: “The idea that all discourse originates as interior text is a more accurate and generally useful theory since it suggests that the thinking that precedes writing is an embryonic form of the final text rather than a different type of discourse” (92). Harris writes, “Unlike the expressive theory that a text comes into existence because a writer is stimulated by an urge to express his or her individual self[1], I believe that the interior text—the idea of the text, of what is needed or desirable or possible—stimulates the writer to create a physical text... The mental construct of a text that occurs to a writer actually serves as the impetus for discourse. That is, the impulse to communicate or create derives from the anticipation of a specific text” (75-6).

On the other hand, she insists on maximum distance or unrelatedness between interior text and final text, for she stresses that the interior text is always nonverbal: “As Vygotsky repeatedly reminds us, thought and language are different phenomena. The difference between them creates an immense challenge for writers and readers, for, in every act of writing and reading, they must transform one into the other” (115; emphasis added). Here’s another example: “Although a writer may ‘rehearse’ words in his or her mind, the interior text is always more (or less) than words” (101; emphasis added). (At a time when many people are tempted to say that all knowledge is verbal, I deeply welcome her insistence on nonverbal knowledge, but her point would be less subject to challenge if she toned it down just a bit, changing “every” and “always” to “many” and “often.”) The interior text that gives rise to writing is liable to be “little more than a fleeting idea or... an image or even a rhythm,” not, however, a feeling (77).

But I am happy and respectful about the ambivalence or even confusion here because it results from her insisting on doing justice to the complexity and even mysteriousness of how writing issues from the mind. She could have made things much clearer by following Witte and restricting “interior text” to mean actual words in our head, but she consciously disagrees with his usage so as to let interior text be better related to the more complicated wellsprings of writing (see her 78).

What I admire is that even though Harris seems to want in general to push away the expressive, here in her treatment of interior text she does not push away the complexities of what is central to people interested in the expressive: invention, the perplexities of where writing comes from or how we get ideas and texts. Indeed, I’d venture to say that the whole movement that she and Berlin call expressive was centrally fueled not by some single-minded obsession with making everyone healthy, but by a renewed interest in invention and a sense of the inadequacies of previous accounts of it—or of
previous tendencies to ignore invention and just talk about arrangement and style.

Though I obviously don't agree with some of her central pedagogical suggestions, many of them seem to me very humane and quite sound. For example, Harris recommends that we should “allow students as much freedom as possible in selecting topics for their writing assignments” (so long as they are not based entirely on their own experience or feelings); we should not use “model essays as a way of initiating a writing assignment”; “it is more useful, once we initiate a writing assignment, to focus on the students’ own texts”; and we should “be less concerned about evaluating the written text and more concerned with the form of the text that exists in the minds of readers and writers and the process by which they construct it” (181-82). She urges us in literature classes to promote the “aesthetic” and not just “pragmatic” purposes of reading—that is, to help students on their first readings to enjoy the text rather than just “study” or “master” it—and to work harder at finding out what happens when students and others read texts for this aesthetic purpose. Such recommendations seem useful.

A Final Note

Let me conclude by asking, “What’s at stake here?” At stake is whether we will ever have an end to the writing of oversimple histories of rhetoric that pigeonhole people into a box called “expressive”—using the word primarily as distortive and pejorative. I hope so. How shall we write the history or draw the map of composition studies? Harris enriches and complicates the map; perhaps this will lead to a more rich and complicated history than she herself gives.

Can her replacement categories and her model provide a helpful contribution to our thinking and discussion in the discipline of composition? I think they can.

Should we abandon certain kinds of discourse and teaching practices she calls expressive? It seems to me that her main (implied) argument against them fails: that the elimination of these things follows from her proposed model of discourse types. What does follow from her model, it seems to me, is the fact that students need to understand the centrality of the notion of discourses in writing: that there are different kinds of discourse, that none are inherently right or wrong, superior or inferior, but that some are better or worse for certain audiences and purposes. And students need to know this experientially, not just theoretically. Surely the best way for them to come to this kind of understanding is to use the widest variety of kinds of discourse—writing for the widest range of audiences and purposes—so they can palpably feel the differences. So to me it's important that students in a writing course (even in college) be asked to engage not only in the kinds of obviously important pragmatic and academic writing tasks Harris wants to restrict us to but also in writing for the kinds of purposes and audiences she
wants to outlaw or call nonexistent. For example, I find that having students experiment with writing that they never show to anyone, moving back and forth between private and public writing, helps them toward Harris' own goal: “to understand or take seriously the role that audience should assume in a rhetorical situation” (176). In sticking up for these things, I'm not trying to say they are better kinds of writing or that they teach writing better than other practices, but that they are useful in certain circumstances for certain goals, that they are legitimate, and that students will have uses for all of them in the future.

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