Stephen Yarbrough's "On the Very Idea of Composition: Modes of Persuasion or Phases of Discourse?" is an ingenious essay, so much so that I find it impossible to respond to the essay as a whole—at least, I cannot do so here, given the exigencies of space. Yarbrough's essay merits the kind of close reading (almost a leisurely reading) that, if performed, would result in a text (much) longer than the original.

But then, immediately, I face another problem: if I cannot respond to the essay as a whole, to what can I respond? What is it that I am—or at least think I am—responding to? Bits and pieces? Can these fragments of the essay (if that's what they in fact are)—words, sentences, paragraphs—be treated discretely? Without question, that is what I am going to do, what I am now doing. But have I thereby committed an indiscretion? If so, it is an indiscretion that language allows, regardless of any ethical imperatives that might serve as necessary preconditions for communication, such as that "the interpreter must tentatively assume that what the interlocutor says is good, that is, appropriate for the social relations the interlocutor believes actually hold in a discursive situation" (503).

Do these bits and pieces remain intelligible? Can they (do any) work on their own, discretely? Can they mean on their own, discretely? Must I understand all of Yarbrough's essay in order to—or, before I can—understand any of it? (And haven't I just applied to a specific case the central question that drives the interminable debate between those who take a holistic view of meaning and those who take an atomistic view of it?) Now, it is certainly the case that Yarbrough wrote a single essay: There is only one text. Or, to play on Donald Davidson's turn of phrase, there is at most one text ("On" 187). But this text is the outcome of what is necessarily a very intricate, temporally and spatially dispersed action that we might describe alternatively as "writing a series of words," "writing a
series of sentences," "writing a series of paragraphs," "writing an essay," and so on. Writing a series of words is not the same action as writing a series of sentences or paragraphs or writing an essay, yet it would be odd to say that Yarbrough wrote a series of words, and also a series of sentences, and also a series of paragraphs, and also an essay, as if these were four actions he performed that are entirely separate from each other. Suppose I tapped Yarbrough on the shoulder while as he was writing his essay—I cannot call what he is doing composing, for, on his account, "there is no such thing" as composition (508)—and ask, "What are you doing?" I would be quite surprised if he answered: "Well, I am writing down a series of words; in addition to and completely different from that, I am writing a series of sentences; in addition to and completely different from both of those, I am writing a series of paragraphs; and, in addition to and completely different from all of these, I am writing an essay."

The question—well, at least one of the many questions, and so soon!—I am asking is this: In the scenario, is Yarbrough performing (and, in real life, did he perform) four actions, \( W, X, Y, \) and \( Z \), simultaneously, or is he performing (and, in real life, did he perform) a single action, \( A \), that may be alternatively described as \( W, X, Y, \) and \( Z \)? Davidson would say the latter; in "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," he makes the following observation: "I flip the switch, turn on the light, and illuminate the room. Unbeknownst to me, I also alert a prowler to the fact that I am home. Here I need not have done four things, but only one, of which four descriptions have been given" (4). This is a monistic or unitary view of action—and recall that, on Yarbrough's account, "discourse is a unitary process" (491). A complete physical description of all of the Yarbrough's bodily movements, the chemical processes in his brain, and so on, that resulted in the writing of his essay would be identical to a complete physical description of all of the bodily movements, and so on, that resulted in his writing a specific concatenation of letter-forms (virtual or inked); just as there would be no difference in a complete physical description of my bodily movements, and so on, that resulted in my driving over to my
parents' home and those that resulted in my operating a car in such a way that it moved from point A (my apartment) to point B (my parents' home).

But let's return to my imagined conversation with Yarbrough, for there is something curious about the assertion, "I am writing an essay." The grammar is impeccable; we frequently say things like "I am watching television" or "I am washing the dishes" or "I am cleaning my room." But grammar can be deceptive (or, better, we may draw the wrong conclusions from it), as Wittgenstein warned long ago. Would it be accurate for Yarbrough to say "I am writing an essay" at the moment in time that I've imagined? Would it be necessarily either a true statement or a false one? Would Yarbrough be justified in believing it to be true? Is saying "I am writing an essay" really on a par with saying "I am watching television"? For all of these questions, I suggest, the answer is "no." To explain why, I must digress; but note: I am not, by digressing, regressing, for no backtracking is allowed, whether in speaking, as Barthes repeatedly asserted, or in writing. Consider these propositions:

• The claim "I am watching television" is true at the time I utter it if I am watching television, whether I watch it for five more hours or seconds.

• The claim "I am watching Citizen Kane" is true at the time I utter it if I am watching Citizen Kane, regardless of whether I watch the entire movie—in just the same way that "I am watching that bird" can be true without my having to witness the bird's entire life.

• The claim "I am cleaning my room" is true at the time I utter it whether or not the room ever becomes "clean"; all that is required is that, as I say it, I am making the room cleaner than it was.¹

• The claim "I am practicing for the Olympics" has no truth value at the time I utter it, however sincerely I believe it, unless I say it as I participate in the Olympics (I am an Olympic athlete during the entirety of the Games, not just during the time I am, say, slaloming down the slopes). This
may seem counterintuitive, until one considers how ridiculous the following claim would be to make: "I am practicing for the Olympics, but I won't attend them." What one practices is an activity—skiing, pole-vaulting, and so on—not a purpose—that is, "for the Olympics." (Or suppose the games, due to some international crisis, are canceled: Can a person really practice for an Olympics that is never held?)

- The claim "I am writing an essay" has no truth value at the time I am imagining Yarbrough utters it, for there is no certainty, at that point in time, that an essay will be written. What can be said with certainty is only this: "I have written an essay." If this seems counterintuitive, consider the following rejoinder to Yarbrough's claim: "Oh, which essay are you writing?" No essay could be produced in response for none has been produced, and events may have turned out otherwise (for example, Yarbrough, to our loss, presses the delete button and moves on to another project).

The mistaken belief that "I am writing an essay" is akin to "I am watching television" results, in part, from the fact that we so frequently accomplish what we say we are doing but are, in reality, trying to do. I say, "I am making a pie," and, behold, a pie gets made; but was it a pie that I was stirring in the mixing bowl? I say, "I am driving to campus," and, voilà, I pull into the faculty parking lot; but was it a destination I was driving, or a car?

The reason why it might be thought otherwise rests upon illusion, albeit a very common one, in which projections and retrospections are conflated in a process I will call, hearkening to Iser in some respects, prospection.² (Perhaps it cannot be helped: we might all be prospectors.) What do I mean? I don't know (as I write this sentence)—so let's find out. How do we find things? By looking for them, obviously. But is the concept of "prospection" waiting patiently for me in the future while I stumble around looking for it? Can I look into the future? No, of course not. (But I can look into the past, as can you: Simply stare into the night sky; yet "prospection," as I will devise it, isn't there/then either.) The future cannot be seen because, insofar as it is futural, it does not exist (see Heidegger); and this nonexistence of the future is not the
same as or a mirror image of the nonexistence of the past. The relations between past, present, and future are not symmetrical: I may not be able to look into my own past, but I can see someone else’s; however, insofar as the future is futural, I cannot see into it—my own or anyone else’s—and, just as importantly, no one can see into mine. All that I can ever see is what, from my perspective, I am doing in the present, the Eternal Now; all that other people can see of me—aside perhaps from those in the closest spatial (and therefore temporal) proximity to me—is what, from my perspective and theirs, I have done; and no one can see—from their perspective or mine, what I have not yet done.

“What I have not yet done”: What is the “what”? Is it a plentiful sign, a sign of plenitude? Why, there is so much that I haven’t done! The list is endless—or would be, if it were possible to write an endless list: I haven’t been to Disneyland; I haven’t run for President; I haven’t written an essay entitled “Is There in Truth No Composition?” (as I write this sentence); et cetera, ad infinitum. But this is too broad: I forgot, momentarily, about the “yet.” It seems obvious that the list of things that I have not yet done must be shorter than the list of things I haven’t done; I presume—and rightly so—that there are (only so many, yet still some) things I will do before I die. And, apparently, I can talk about some of them, such as my death. But there is no referent for “my death”—and, I sincerely hope, there won’t be for many years! I can imagine what I want and say what I like about “my death,” but one thing I cannot do is say something about “it” after the fact; and until there is “the fact,” “my death” does not exist (in the sense that events exist as surely as objects, a claim with which Davidson would concur).

The inevitability of death may make us feel as if our death is already waiting for us, but this is an illusion. My death is no more waiting for me to die than something called “my arrival” is always waiting for me as I head toward my intended destination. I am always arriving somewhere, somehow, but not because I keep bumping into the members of a chain of “arrivals” that extends always already from my birth to my death. After I am dead, someone looking back on my life would see that it was comprised
of a chain of such-and-such events; and if I could somehow manage the neat trick of being both dead and capable of seeing my life from that vantage point, I would see the same chain. We can always impose an order, or, better, a principle of ordering, after the fact. What might appear, from this later vantage point, as my sliding along a preexisting chain—much as a tightrope walker crossing a high-wire—would be better conceived as my building a chain as I go. Better, but not best, for whether I build it or not, the chain continually forms, and I encounter it always in its formation. The chain, for me, caught as I am in the present, is perpetually nascent. Munchausen-like, I resemble a tightrope walker who sees no wire ahead (because there is no wire ahead) yet who always finds wire underfoot with each new step. (To complete the analogy, I should add that, were I to look behind me, I would also see no wire; it cannot be seen directly, but only through representations or other traces.) Simply put, yet not simple: the chain, at any given point in time (and space), extends no farther or further than I do, at any given point in time (and space).

But is the "what," then, a sign of an absence? Is it evacuated of meaning? No. Whether or not a sign has a referent that is present or absent or nonexistent, the sign itself is present—or, better, it is entirely positive; an object can no more be a partial sign than it can have a partial temperature. Is the "what" a sign that is evacuated of meaning? No, for a sign cannot lack meaning; although it can be properly said of something, "That's a sign, but I don't know what it means (for someone else)," it cannot properly be said of that same thing, "That's a sign, but it doesn't mean anything (for me or anyone else)." Compare: "That plastic figurine is definitely a rook, but it cannot be moved horizontally or vertically on a chessboard as part of a game of chess." Something is not a rook and, in addition, a figurine that can be moved horizontally or vertically on a chessboard as part of a game of chess; similarly, something is not a sign and, in addition, something that is meaningful.

For me, the "what" is not the sign of a plenitude from which infinite meanings can be extracted, nor is it a vacuum—a lack—into
which infinite meanings can be poured; rather, it is a finitude that 
lacks for nothing, even though its limits may change, just as a child 
is not an “incomplete” or “insufficient” human being despite the fact 
that it is not yet, but will become, an adult. (I am reminded here of 
Vitanza, who follows Deleuze and Guattari in suggesting that a 
desire is not a lack: it is entirely positive.) Meanings do not flow out 
of the finite utterance, for it cannot be emptied; nor do they fill it in, 
for this would imply an emptiness or insufficiency; nor do they fill it 
up, for its limits are not limiting, in the sense that something more 
can always be added to it. Analogously, a glass can be emptied of 
its water, but a glass of water cannot be empty (but a water glass 
can be); a gas tank is, ideally, filled with gas, but a water puddle is 
not, ideally, filled with water; a barrel may be filled to overflowing, 
but not an ocean, which is wherever it flows.

If one thinks about meaning as I do, in terms of actual (not 
potential) consequences of utterances, the “meaning” of an utter­
ance is open-ended insofar as its consequences continue to 
propagate; but this entails that the meaning of an utterly forgotten 
utterance is closed—it has come to an end (it could be reopened 
only if it were possible for something that was utterly forgotten to 
be remembered). Given postmodernism’s critique of totality, we 
have become suspicious of words like “closure,” but there is 
nothing mysterious or momentous about the closure or, what 
amounts to the same thing, the disappearance of meaning. The 
figurine of a rook is utterly incinerated—where did its meaning go? 
Does its meaning survive the incineration? If no, then are mean­
ings combustible? If yes, then where is its meaning?—freed from 
the figurine like a soul freed from a dying body? If I use a thimble 
as a substitute for the plastic figurine, is this made possible by the 
movement of the meaning “rook” from the figurine to the thimble, 
which now has that selfsame meaning? If not, how did the thimble 
acquire the “power” to move across a chessboard? (Searle would 
likely put it this way: How does a touchdown have the power to 
create six points?) Not by virtue of having the attributes of a rook 
as some of its “potential meanings” or “meaning potentials.” Is 
“something that could be used as rook” part of the meaning of
"thimble"? Then so must it be part of the meaning of, say, "eraser," "peanut," "pebble." A particular thimble, by being used in certain ways during a game of chess, has certain consequences; these consequences are what make it a rook, not some property of "rookishness" that is intrinsic to all thimbles.

So, then, the meaning of the "what" changes through time as I do things. We can know only after the fact what we haven't done yet, for it is only by doing things that we can come to say what it was that we hadn't yet done. Imagine the following exchange between two speakers, A and B:

A: There's so much I haven't done yet.
B: Like what?
B: How do you know you will?
A: Huh? I've never been there!
B: Well, yes, but not having visited Paris is not the same thing as not yet having visited Paris.
A: I don't see your point. Are you splitting hairs again?
B: Hardly, although you may think so. To say you haven't yet visited Paris implies that you will visit it at some point in the future. But what if you never make it?
A: I'm traveling there by plane next week. Would you like to see the travel arrangements?
B: Suppose your car crashes on the way to the airport?
A: Oh, what a pleasant thought. . . . I'd take a later flight.
B: Suppose your plane crashes in the Atlantic? If you're dead, would it make any sense for someone else to say that you haven't yet visited Paris?
A: I guess not.
B: The only way to know that you haven't visited Paris yet is to visit Paris.

Suppose A does visit Paris the following week. Was visiting Paris, then, something A hadn't yet done at the time of the dialogue? Unless the future is predetermined—unless the movement of time, as Bergson would say, resembles the unfurling of a flag—the answer is, strictly speaking, "no." It is tempting to say that the truth-value of the claim "I haven't yet visited Paris" was, in due course,
finally *revealed*, but the reality is that the truth-value of the claim was *determined*. It is a mistake easily made, for the distance between the error and the truth is that (significant) gap that lies between saying “It is true that A hasn’t yet visited Paris” and saying “It was true that A hadn’t yet visited Paris.”

The upshot of my argument, or at least one of them, is that an essay doesn’t have parts until after it is written. Why? Because, until it is written, there is no essay that could have parts; therefore, an essay is not the culmination of an act of composition—in the sense of assembling parts into a whole. On the contrary, an essay *is the culmination of a concatenation of wholes* (letters, words, sentences, paragraphs) that *eventually became parts*: whole letters that *eventually became parts of words* (letters are not “fragments of words”: they lack nothing); whole words that *eventually became parts of sentences* (words are not “fragments of sentences”); whole sentences that *eventually become parts of paragraphs* (sentences are not “fragments of paragraphs”). In fact, saying “whole” is unnecessary, for a sentence cannot be otherwise than a whole sentence—there are no partial sentences, for there is no sentence to have parts before it is whole. Consider: Is “going to the store” the fragment of a sentence? If yes, then, of which sentence is it a fragment? It appears to be a “sentence fragment” because it is so easy for us to tack on (whole) words, thereby imagining a (whole) sentence of which this concatenation of words could be a part—in effect, *completing* the sentence in the way that *installing* the final piece completes a jigsaw puzzle. But a written word does not precede its letters, nor does a written sentence precede its words; similarly, a spoken word does not precede a specific concatenation of sounds, nor does a spoken sentence precede a specific concatenation of spoken words. Once we have an essay, then, and only then, we may identify (or carve) as many “parts of the essay” as we please.³

I suggest that writing involves the concatenation—or would it be better to say the *accretion*?—of discrete elements. The text is not continuous, but minutely quantized, for concatenation does not efface individuation. In fact, one can have a “concatenation of
elements" only insofar as the elements survive the concatenation; the letters of a word do not fuse into a single letter, nor is the writing of a word accomplished by an overwriting of letters—in the same way that a melody is not produced by an overlapping of sounds, but by their articulated modulation. Imagine an overlay of "r," "e," "a," and "d." Perhaps I could make out the letters. But which word is it—"read" or "dear" or "dare"? Now imagine an overlay of "concatenation"—even if I could discern letters, how would I know that the overlay includes two c's, not one (or five)?

What is continuous is not text, but the activity of concatenation; or, in other words, what is continuous (if anything is continuous) is not what is written, but the activity that we call "writing an essay"—a calling that is made, appropriately, only in retrospect; otherwise, mistakenly. "Writing an essay" is one action, albeit temporally distended; but the monism of the action—which, as I cannot emphasize this enough, is entirely retrospective—need not entail the monism of its consequences, only one of which is the production of a text (another consequence of writing an essay might be my developing a headache); and, furthermore, what under one description is a single unit may, under another description, be divided into many smaller units.

So, I conclude this particular response—but not my engagement with Yarbrough's essay, which I hope will continue, but who can say?—by agreeing with him that, echoing Davidson ("Nice"), there is no such thing as composition, not if composition is anything like what many teachers, researchers, and theorists—Yarbrough included, if I have understood him rightly—have proposed.

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Notes

1. If someone thinks otherwise—that is, that cleaning one's room requires the room to be fully cleaned—I won't dispute the point, for it does not jeopardize mine; at most, "I am cleaning my room" would be similar to my analysis of "I am writing an essay."
2. I should add that this "illusion" is, for the most part, a harmless one, without consequence. I wouldn't "correct" someone who says, "I am driving to the airport." And how gloomy it would be to think, "Well, I'm going to try to drive to work this morning, but I may not make it." But in terms of a scholarly argument, the niceties of such distinctions should not be overlooked.

3. For example: Write "Once we have an essay, then, and only then, we may identify (or carve) as many 'parts of the essay' as we please" onto a sheet of paper, then cut the it in half. On one piece of paper would be the fragment—"Once we have an essay, then, and only then"—of a specific sentence, not a "sentence fragment" in some abstract sense; for we could answer the question, "Of which sentence is it a fragment?" Note that I am setting aside the question of how to determine the point in time when a text becomes an essay.

Works Cited


