

Literary Disestablishmentarianism

T.L. Cowan
University of Alberta

WHEN I READ STEPHEN SLEMON's call for the "Why Do I Have To Write Like That" panel (ACCUTE Conference 2007), I was struck by its plaintive cry for the freedom to write outside of the lines. I received the call a few days after I had sent to press the *Canadian Theatre Review* issue I edited, an issue that included contributions from academics and artists, most of whom are non-academics. Many of these writers write very far outside the lines of what we in the academy understand and teach as "good critical writing," and my experience as editor was a fraught one, which led me to (and through) a crisis of faith and, in turn, to the following response to Slemon's call.

While we can bemoan the current state of critical writing in our discipline, we are not without models for different kinds of writing. Indeed, outside-of-the-establishment critical writers—those writers not trained or disciplined to conform to the particulars of what we currently understand as "good critical writing" within the academy—are already, and necessarily, writing differently than "we" do. Those "tortured analytical documents" (Slemon) that we teach and ourselves produce are the badges that assert our identities as experts; they are the thing that differentiates us from the other writers out there. Thus, when Slemon asks, "What is ventured in the

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T. L. COWAN is a
doctoral candidate in the
Department of English
and Film Studies at the
University of Alberta.
She still believes in
paragraphs.

attempt to revolutionize critical commentary in the discipline? What is not ventured?” I must emphatically respond that to write differently might mean writing like a non-academic, and to venture into this territory will require that we reconsider our investment in the academic/non-academic split when it comes to critical writing.

The experience of editing the fourteen essays in the *CTR* issue forced me to contend with my own biases about what constitutes good critical writing. In particular, I found that I had to do some soul-searching upon realizing (when I felt an instinctive and visceral resistance to the non-conventional critical writing of some of the essays) that I *like* formal academic writing, and—more damning than that given the context of this forum—that I had, over fifteen years (off and on) of being a post-secondary student and a few years of teaching introductory English at the University of Alberta, come to *believe* in it.

For me, a piece of good critical writing begins with a thesis paragraph (sometimes prefaced with an anecdote or some other personal touch—which, let’s be honest, generally gets truncated and sanitized during the vetting process), systematically followed by a series of well-organized paragraphs, each elaborating a main idea, which one can reliably find in a well-crafted topic sentence somewhere close to the beginning of said paragraph. There is little rambling and almost no ranting. Anything beside the point is stored discretely in the footnotes (though—sadly, again—these are generally considered disposable when the final word count creeps above the limit). Nothing is misspelled (unless self-consciously so, in which case the misspelled word is coded as linguistic intervention through the assiduous placement of dashes, hyphens, quotation marks, and/or parentheses); it goes without saying that there are no distracting errors in grammar or punctuation. Good critical writing, I believed, was rigorous and impersonal (save the prefatory anecdote, of course).

Now, while I still believe that one can rarely go wrong with a solid thesis statement, after editing a number of insightful, creative, and certainly unconventional essays for the *CTR* issue, I’ll confess that I’ve become less of a revival-tent believer and more of a Christmas-and-Easter parishioner at the Church of Good Critical Writing.

CTR is the ideal forum for the kind of dialogue I was hoping to create for a collection of essays on spoken word performance, the topic of this issue. It is a crossover journal that publishes a range of critical writing including articles and essays, personal narratives and performance histories, interviews, reviews, dialogues, panels, and other non-traditional critical writing and invites submissions for every issue from academics and

artists, many of whom are not academics. I explained all of this in what I thought was an irresistibly inviting CFP, which I sent around not only to the usual academic places but also via email and handbill to dozens and dozens of spoken word artists across the country and beyond. I expected that my efforts would attract a bounty of adventurous submissions.

The first deadline passed and a few academics sent in abstracts. Only one of the artists I had invited to submit sent something in. When I approached several artists who had expressed interest after receiving the CFP and asked them why they didn't submit anything, they told me over and over again: "I can't write like that." These artists, all of them nationally and internationally respected as performers and writers, were convinced that they couldn't articulate anything interesting in a way that sounded "smart enough."

Finally, after I assured many artists that I wanted whatever form of writing with which they were comfortable, I received abstracts and, a year later, final papers.

Enter crisis of faith.

Through the process of working with the contributors for the issue, I realized that, although I said that I wanted writing outside the lines, my initial response to the essays revealed that my values and expectations around critical writing were still very much informed by my experience as an academic. I was shocked to receive essays with no thesis statements and essays that used language in a way that assumed its transparency; in short, essays that read (gasp!) like popular journalism. On first read-through, my marginalia included the following comments: "What do you mean by this?"; "Cliché!"; "ANOTHER sentence fragment!"; and, "Pick *one* argument and stick with it!" This first read-through reflected my grading process (although I am a bit kinder to my students), one designed to discipline/convert students to the conventions of good academic critical writing. It is a process meant to produce writing that is ideologically encoded as upper middle class and white, writing which informs its readers: "The person who wrote this is educated." This is the kind of writing that had enabled me to pass as middle class for most of my life. My belief in the conventions of good critical writing, it turns out, was more a belief in its levelling power than a belief in its superiority as a rhetorical mode. After reading these essays, I realized that I expected everyone *would want* (or at least want to try) to write like that, that everyone would want to pass as middle class and educated.

This editing process was thus a lesson in the politics of writing. These papers taught me to understand "academic writing" and "critical writing"

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differently and to re-evaluate my roles as editor, writer, and educator. I learned to think about what was useful, original, and thought-provoking about a piece of writing and to work with that, valuing the personal voice of the piece (and to use the term “personal voice” *without* quotation marks). Critical writing does not have to conform to academic formulas. In fact, thinking about critical writing as something that can happen outside of the academy has allowed me to think about it as a form that does not necessarily require a graduate degree to produce but, rather, a writer’s genuine commitment to ideas and dialogue (note the absolute lack of self-reflexive quotation marks around “genuine”). I learned, in short, that there are different kinds of critical writing.

Through this editing process, I came believe that we need to create forums wherein academics and non-academics can publish critical writing that does not conform to academic convention, and we need to expand our existing forums so that they will accommodate a broader range of critical writing. This project is possible, I believe, but it is not without pitfalls. For example, the minimal (if any) writer’s fee paid by an academic journal makes it unlikely that non-academic writers will participate in the dialogues taking place within these journals. Furthermore, many (if not most) university presses retain the copyright on articles published in their journals, a practice that academics can abide since they will generally be rewarded for publications and reprints come faculty evaluation time; for non-academics, however, signing over copyright is a professionally unsound practice.

Always a sucker for a good conspiracy theory, I wonder if the culture of academic publishing is so inhospitable to non-academics in order to ensure that only trained, specialized writers contribute to critical literary discourse. Policing the conventions of critical writing is one of the ways we maintain a deep and foreboding moat around the castle known as “The Literary Establishment.” Adjusting what we understand as good critical writing will mean that we will need to build some bridges across that moat: We need to adjust our expectations around who participates in critical discourse, and—although I realize that this suggestion will be met with cries of “That’s not economically feasible!”—our publications will need to respond to the professional needs of writers who do not hold or aspire to tenured faculty positions. It is from this idea that I take my title “Literary Disestablishmentarianism.” By maintaining rigid conventions about the kind of writing that we value as *good* and *critical*, we exclude writers from outside the academy who have something to contribute and who can, perhaps, revitalize what Slemon calls “this baleful genre” of literary

criticism. To disestablish ourselves, then, is to re-evaluate our priorities and, ultimately, to change our definitions of what kind of writing is “smart enough” to be taken seriously.

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