

Review Essay: A Word for Peter

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Elbow, Peter. *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012. 442 pages.

Hi, Peter. I've read your remarkable book, *Vernacular Eloquence: What Speech Can Bring to Writing*, with great admiration and fascination. The admiration comes from my abiding interest in pretty much everything you've written and said, starting in my earliest days as a graduate student at the end of the 1970s. The fascination comes from my own longstanding interest in the relationships between speaking and writing. I began using cassette tapes in 1982 to respond to my students, who would first talk to me on the same cassette about what they'd tried to do in their papers. (I also studied their talk and found features that linked to their writing abilities.) I've now extended that interest into a research project that explores screen-capture technology: five-minute, YouTube-like video clips of spoken feedback accompanied by scrolling and highlighting on the student's text.

For years I've taught language and linguistics courses with units on oral and written discourse, how children learn to talk and write, and the rich ways that speech varies across dialect groups. I've also been attracted to dialogue. I often ask students to write dialogues between two authors or theorists, or historical or literary characters, and I've experimented with my own published dialogues. I find that students do remarkable things with dialogue because they have so much experience speaking. Early on, I assigned dialogue journals extensively in my classes but now I form small blog groups where students interact in a way that resembles speech. I direct a Campus Writing *and Speaking* Program. And I teach in a PhD program in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media, where we study different modes and media.

You know some of this, of course. But it still may come as a surprise that I created this review from a combination of strategies owing largely to the

ideas in your book. Part of it, the first few pages, began with very fast free-writing, from what you call “blurting onto the page.” Other parts appeared almost magically on the screen as I spoke into a MacSpeech Dictate program that created written text from my uttered words. (I even found myself closing my eyes as I spoke, forgetting about you, the journal, even review editor Ed White.) I also read the piece aloud several times after I had a draft. Later, I’ll reflect a little on how I feel about the results, because they speak to some of the ideas in your book as I practiced them. But for now, to the task at hand: a review of *Vernacular Eloquence*, in many ways your *magnum opus*, a work that pulls together and extends a life of scholarly and practical explorations of writing and speaking.

You structured *Vernacular Eloquence* in an interesting way, first with a section exploring everything that’s good about speaking and writing, but mostly about speaking. (You say that writing is the *goal* for the book, but speaking is its *impetus*.) And in this first section we learn that you’re going to focus on speaking and writing from all sorts of perspectives—cultural, historical, biological, to name a few. That leads to Part Two, an exploration of how “speaking onto the page” can help during the early stages of writing, as I tried to make it do for me in this review. Part Three is all about reading aloud, how giving voice to written text can help in the later stages of writing, especially in revision. Part Four broadens the focus to some of the ideological and sociocultural issues you’ve taken up in other recent work: how speech gets excluded from literacy and how serious writing “does not accept spoken language.” You end on a positive note about the flexibility of language, about the tug-of-war between standardization and divergence, and about the possibilities that divergence gives us in a world where we might end up accepting nonmainstream and stigmatized versions of English as “serious writing.” But this summary of the four main parts doesn’t do justice to the impressive range of your explorations—everything from the future of the world’s more than six thousand languages to the minutiae of punctuation conventions and how they relate to the sounds and rhythms of sentences. I think readers will love how much is here, how you seem to have gone on a hunt for every bit of knowledge and perspective you could find about speech and writing no matter what the source or discipline. And then how you don’t just *tell* us about it but deploy it in a highly reflective claim about the rootedness of writing in speaking.

Two innovative decisions you made about the material in these wide-ranging chapters struck me. First, you chose to include shaded boxes here and there that contain scholarship general readers may not be interested in reading but that academics might want to know. Some boxes also serve as extended footnotes elaborating on some point, or qualifying it. Second, you

end each chapter with a literacy story. These are mostly interesting historical sketches that some readers can also skip if they just want to hear the main arguments and explorations. So the result is a book that gives readers the choice to move along at a steady pace or take some time with various curiosities, reflections, and asides.

At first I was a little ambivalent about these decisions. You've done years of homework for this project, and it was clearly hard not to share material that most people would find a little erudite, because much of it supports and extends your views on speaking and writing. But you also want to reach teachers and students and even bookstore-browsing folks who want to improve their own writing. I'm a scholar, so I read all the shaded boxes and most of the literacy stories with interest. At times the main material sounded quite scholarly, and I wondered how it differed from the boxed material if this is an audience-helping device. But then there was also a lot of information in the main part of the text that I found myself thinking, well, I know all this, but I'll go along with it to follow the thread. That made for an interesting and sometimes odd journey. I'd see a building or monument that I knew well, and then you'd turn a corner and I'd learn about something I didn't know, or you'd call attention to something I hadn't ever really *seen* even though I'd passed it before. I didn't want to get frustrated by the familiar parts because I never knew when something would surprise me.

Maybe it was because of the complex and layered audiences you're invoking (too many at once?), or maybe it was because Ed White was standing on my shoulder with a calendar, but the book also felt a bit *long*. Not long-winded. Just a lot of work to get through. I think if I'd had no deadline, I'd have read it more in pieces, and that may have been one of your strategies: to make a book that people can read in chunks, and spend more time on if they want to delve into the shaded sections and the literacy stories. But then I'm not sure—and really, I'm not sure—whether I'd have plowed my way through to the end. After putting the book down for a day or two, I felt a little lost picking it up again, wondering, Where were we on the tour before we stopped for lunch? This may be as much about me. I have three or four novels and works of nonfiction stacked on my nightstand with bookmarks showing where I left off . . . two months, seven months, over a year ago. This is the sort of book that announces its destination clearly at the start, but then the voyage is more like a barge cruise down the Rhine, meandering at times and docking to explore some interesting little villages, than a nonstop flight from New York to Los Angeles.

At the beginning of Part Two, you try teasing out the differences between speaking and writing as mental activities and as physical activi-

ties. In some ways that became for me the most theoretically challenging part of your exploration. In the end, *Vernacular Eloquence* favors the physical, less so the cerebral, in its treatment of speaking and writing. I get an almost fleshy feel from your descriptions of “blurting” onto the page, reading aloud to yourself or other people, talking about writing and the role of the voice and tongue and ear. And in our hyper-technologized world, your human(e)ness gives comfort. Some scholars in our field write about the concept of *embodiment*, often in ways that make my head spin because they’re so heavily theorized and rendered in lexically dense prose with lots of those left-branching structures that you painstakingly critique (and even decry). But your approach is decidedly about the embodiment of writing. At one point, Janet Emig’s article “Hand, Eye, Brain” came to mind and you made me think, why not “Hand, Eye, Mouth, Brain”? Ultimately, it’s “body and brain” or “brain embodied.” Brain is a big part of the equation, but how big? I’ll come back to that.

Now, I’ve just said that this is a long book, and maybe a couple of pages too long. So I feel a little conflicted about talking about what’s left out. For me, there were three small gaps. First, I wondered why you didn’t do much with the speaking/writing relationship for people who can’t speak, or hear, or see. What about the good writing, writing that looks like it came from speaking on the page, that I saw at the National Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, New York? Where did that come from if it didn’t have its deep origins in the sounds of speech?

You also include a lot about reading aloud but less so about work on reading that helps us to see the relationship between speaking and writing in new ways. For example (and here’s a shaded box): we’ve all watched people move their lips as they read silently. They don’t seem to be able to read the text without first converting it back into speech, a kind of reversal of “speaking onto the page”: they vocalize the text. But there’s also a process called *subvocalization* that reading theorists and physiologists have studied at length (I realize that you know about this because you mention it in passing in your article “What Do We Mean When We Talk about Voice in Texts?”). Subvocalization is this lip/tongue/vocal cord-moving gone underground. Researchers have wired people up to sensors that measure tiny movements in the vocal apparatus. It turns out that even silent readers who don’t make any visible movements are subtly and imperceptibly moving their vocal organs in the “direction” of the speech sounds as they read. This and other research on reading only reinforces the relationships between speaking and written text. But it’s research on reading, not speaking or writing, that reveals these relationships, and I’d have liked more acknowledgment of that research.

Finally, here and there you bring up the role of technology in speaking and writing. There's a bit about voice recognition, some more bits about blogging and other speechy forms of writing, and a bit at the end about how writing may get much more diverse in our "new Wild West" because "there are no filters to enforce a standard" (380). But digital technologies are merging speaking and writing in unique and captivating ways. At times I wanted you to muse a little more about how technology complicates our thinking about writing and speaking and what role visual and auditory media play as well.

Most of the time while reading *Vernacular Eloquence*, I played the believing game, partly because of your characteristic way of doubting yourself and then working your way through those doubts and clarifying your positions. Even so, I also found myself doubting beyond your own doubts, even a little guiltily. Not what you researched: I enjoyed reading what I knew and even more what I didn't know. It was your conviction that speaking onto the page somehow produces better, more authentic, livelier, more readable, maybe even more meaningful prose. I'm completely with you about the idea, in principle. But my research side is constantly asking, is this really true for all writers? So much of what you describe seems so *you*. And you take great pains to document similar processes in other excellent writers. But who's left out? My doubting game got me wondering whether there are writers out there, dead or alive, who behave(d) in totally on-the-page, non-speech-generated ways with great results.

I also found myself doubting that left-branching structures or suspended syntax or complicated stylistic tropes or other characteristics of very "written" text always make reading harder. I wondered about the relationship between reading ability and the structures of writing—something that a number of scholars like Kintsch and van Dijk studied in the 1980s and 1990s—and I'd like to know more about this issue. Some highly complex kinds of syntax are hard to read but once we develop the ability to do so, reading becomes delightful, a kind of syntactic untangling. My own countering instinct wants to say that such prose and the ability to read it exist in textual worlds that can be inhabited with some work. And I can already hear your counterpoint, your interest in democratizing writing and helping people, especially young people, to avoid associating writing with groups they don't belong to. Part of me screams, no, don't stick up for those rarified textual worlds, go with Peter: those are worlds of the intellectual-verbal elite and all the training they get and the well-schooled language they hear at home. Or the literati, who spend their lives cultivating an interest in complex prose.

But take a look at the first few lines of Milton's "On His Blindness":

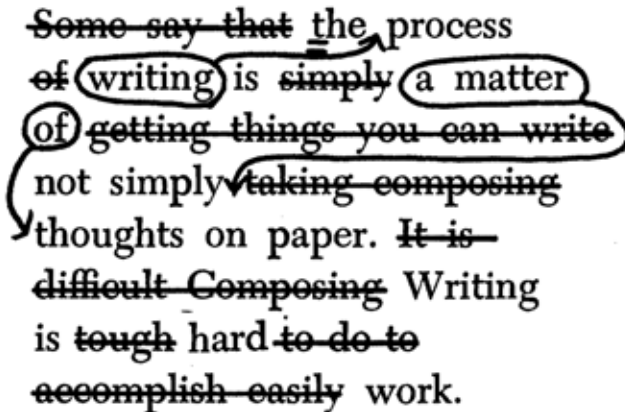
When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide,
“Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”
I fondly ask. (lines 1-8)

Now, I know you could argue that there’s a spoken dimension to this piece of writing, a stacking up of ideas almost as if Milton composed them aloud. In fact, he did. He was blind, and at this stage of his life he dictated all his writing, as you note about *Paradise Lost*. So we could say that the poem has a quite literal origin in speech. But my point is really about the complicated syntax that we need to unravel—the long suspension between that opening “when,” which already signals one of those nasty left-branching structures, and the pause before the question, then the thud of those final three words that make us wonder whether we’ve unraveled it correctly. This takes the kind of *work* with text that speech rarely demands of us (and when it does, we usually say, “Huh?” and the person restructures the thought). I realize that poems often deliberately call attention to their own complex syntax because they’re language as art, not plain communication. But I think we could find other examples from non-artistic contexts.

So I’m agreeing with you about the subsequent work that writing-with-its-origins-in-speaking requires (what you call “the need for care” in Chapter 10). But I’m disagreeing with the emphasis you put on the easy-speaking part and the careful-but-almost-natural-refining part. That subsequent work is much more work-like than we want to advertise, partly because we don’t want to make writing scary or too difficult. It’s the kind of expertise the work yields that I’m favoring, the kind of work with text that Joseph Harris and others have advocated so strongly. Notice also the role of reading in that work. Not just giving voice to the text or reading aloud, as you discuss in Part Three, but doing the work of unraveling, of wresting meaning from complicated prose. The process you describe does move from blurting or talking onto the page (because it’s more genuine and natural and freeing) toward refinement, but the refinement is *harder work* and more developmental than I think you’re willing to say here, and it takes a certain disposition and motivation for the work that’s hard to inspire in classrooms. The hard work then loops back into better, more skilled speaking, writing, and reading. I’m reminded of my friend and mentor Michael Flanigan’s delightful poem “To Jackson Pollock” (Figure 1). Notice how the early starts—the lines that get revised—begin in the *written* mode and

then *move toward the spoken*. That is, instead of starting with speech-like writing and then refining it toward something more written, it moves in the other direction. It's not clear to me whether it's easier to go from speech-like writing to refined speech-like writing (with all the careful, hard work of revision) or the other way around.

To Jackson Pollock



~~Some say that the process~~
~~of writing~~ is simply a matter
~~of getting things you can write~~
not simply ~~taking~~ composing
thoughts on paper. It is
~~difficult~~ Composing Writing
is ~~tough~~ hard to do to
~~accomplish~~ easily work.

Figure 1

I've long supported accommodationist approaches to language difference and abhorred eradicationist approaches. So the final section of your book, "Vernacular Literacy," had me nodding a lot in agreement. That section argues that no language has ever been able to stand still, that vernacular literacies have sometimes become a standard, and that speech often gets excluded in the process of standardizing writing. But I also got puzzled by a seeming contradiction about diversity and standards. Aren't you really saying throughout the book that there's a kind of genuine, authentic, honest writing that starts in speech or has affinities with speech, and that everyone can achieve such writing? And if so, that seems like a kind of standard.

That is, you're singling out writing with certain features, especially oral ones, that seems "preferable" to writing with other features. At the same time, aren't you saying that there's room for many diverse kinds of writing from diverse language traditions? ("Nonmainstream and stigmatized versions of English will be acceptable for all serious writing" (378).) And that's where I see a possible contradiction. What if a group of people finds that

some degree of nominalization and passivization suits their purposes? We might be able to show them how the kind of writing you're advocating here is "better" for them, but wouldn't that be an attempt to influence or cajole or compel them to adopt another standard? I'm wondering if we can have it both ways: push for writing that has "liveliness, natural connection with audience, intonation that magically carries meaning, and . . . other virtues" (124) but at the same time respect and value the habits and conventions of all groups and cultures.

Another shaded box: I'm reminded of a study that a couple of my colleagues at the University of Minnesota did some years ago (Brown and Herndl). They trained smart MBA-holding middle-managers at large corporations to recognize certain "bad" elements in their writing, especially some of the elements you describe in Chapter Four, "Nine Virtues in Careless Unplanned Spoken Language that Can Significantly Improve Careful Writing." The managers learned fast and started writing their memos and reports in the new way. Then the researchers went away for a few months. When they came back, these smart, well-trained managers had slipped back to their old ways. Why? Because the habits and norms of their community trumped their new practices. They looked and felt like outsiders, especially those who felt most vulnerable.

To your credit, it's these kinds of puzzles and engaging questions that *Vernacular Eloquence* raises. Your rhetorical style is to circle around the questions, to look at them from various angles and to play a kind of dialogue with yourself, doubting and believing. That's always intrigued me and made reading your work so much fun. It's especially so with this book, maybe because you've included different kinds of texts with different purposes, some informative and factual, some deliberately equivocal and exploratory, some personal and anecdotal. Every teacher should read the book for this very reason: it stimulates deep thought about the puzzles of learning to write while also educating us in a lively and readable way about the nature and history of speech and writing. And it does so constantly mindful of what happens in writing classrooms and how we can help young writers to learn their craft. It's also a must-read for all writing program administrators, who should be on the lookout for fresh approaches to their curriculums and their teacher-development programs.

Finally, I want to reflect a little on what I've done here, because I think if I've followed the spirit of your work, I've done what I think you would support. I've tried as much as possible to use the many interesting strategies that your book offers. I've tried to avoid that left-branching syntax. I've spoken my thoughts out both orally and as a "silent" composing method. I've read the text aloud a few times to get a better sense of it. In preparing the

manuscript, I also did some of the work you suggest highly speech-enabled writing requires, going back and tinkering with sentences and removing redundancies, which my ear really dislikes. I've worked with care on the blurred parts and even done a little more "writing-oriented" (or at least academic) revision, such as incorporating quotations that I couldn't stop to include while blurting or dictating. Finally, though, I'm not entirely satisfied with the text, even after these refinements. There's something about really *written* text that I'm drawn to, even when it leans toward the formal and stylized. It may be that I need to unlearn this, or that I haven't yet seen the shortcomings of such prose. But it may also be that what you gain from a strongly spoken text you also lose in the polish that formal, written prose can often yield. Strongly "written" text may not lend itself to being spoken, but it lends itself to being read, and I think that there's something in the relationship between writing and reading that may be more direct than we assume.

Personally and on behalf of everyone in our profession, thank you for this major contribution to our knowledge and our practices.

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