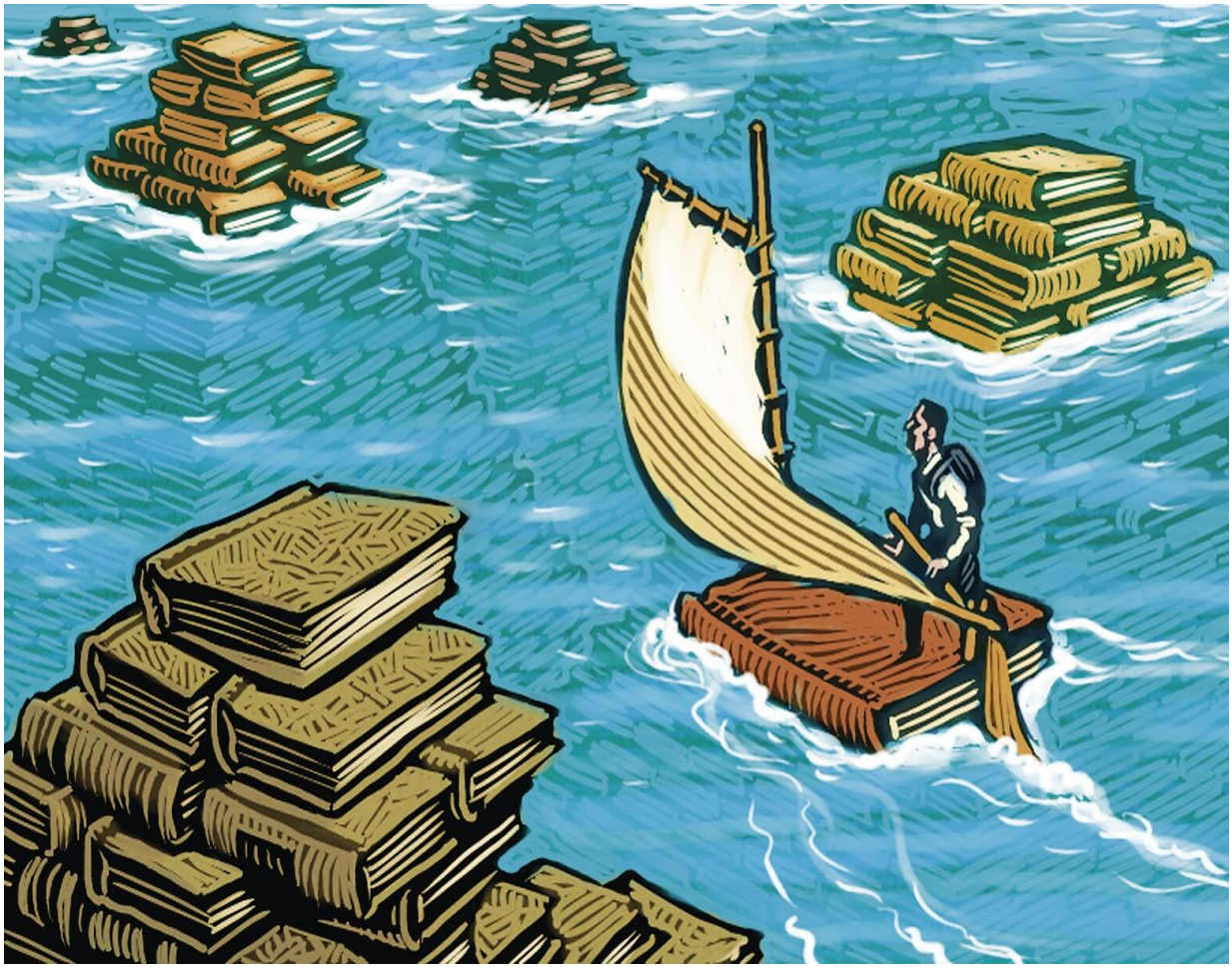
The Review

Writing After Academe

By *Andrew Kay* July 10, 2017



Tim Foley for The Chronicle Review

Last summer — following three years on the academic job market and nine fruitless interviews, possessed at last of a Ph.D. in English literature that seemed, to borrow a phrase of Louis C.K.'s, "like having a bunch of money in the currency of a country that doesn't exist anymore" — I stood in my kitchen laboring over Italian desserts. More accurately, I bent, in a sweaty trance, over an ironing board on which I rolled out dough for Sicilian pastries — garish, pornographic — that, half Italian, I'd grown up eating and lately learned to make: *sfingi*, shells of fried dough gravid with cream and covered with maraschino cherries, meant to look like breasts; cannoli, tubes tumid with ricotta and flecked with pistachios, whose eroticism was too obvious to bother pointing out.

Lately I had thought of little else. Not the future, not my bills, certainly not my dissertation, a 280-page treatise on 19th-century poetry and pleasure I'd deposited eight months before, which might never see

another pair of eyes. This work was different. There was an airtight arithmetic to baking: Replicate a recipe faithfully, and you would produce a tangible object that you could hold aloft, photograph, share with your friends. They were beautiful and bulletproof, these recipes, in a way scarcely resistible to one who'd spent years laboring over academic articles and chapters that might or might not yield a job, yield anything. What was a recipe anyway but a poem, a line-by-line unfolding, complete with turns and ornamental flourishes, toward a pleasure borne in the body?

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I rarely ate the finished products. Rather, I boxed them up and gave them away to friends, who accepted them with some combination of gratitude and bewilderment. What I needed, I see now, was the feeling of providing pleasure and even nourishment to people. Teaching had long supplied this need. For nearly a decade I had eked out a living explaining poetry to people. It was what I did, the natural expression of my inscape. Armed with Dickinson, Hopkins, and Stevens, I'd offered 20-year-olds a kind of spiritual sustenance-to-go, the way some bullying *nonna* might foist foil-wrapped macaroons, pears, and tupperwared eggplant onto embarrassed kids on seeing them out the door and into the night, the visit over. Someday, far down the road, they would wake to find themselves beset by some great and enshrouding loneliness, betrayed by all they thought they knew — and lo, there my bundle of provisions would be.

Now, lacking this vocation, I fell to making pastries, offering up a nutriment far more literal. If you didn't know better you might have labeled it "stress baking," but I wasn't stressed; I was mourning. Mourning a stillborn life, a prospective person I'd nurtured the better part of a decade, then prepared to send out into the world, only to watch it — its breath, the expansive ambitions with which I'd laden it — get smothered by a litany of *no*s, *no*s repeated so many times, they took on the stature of some existential verdict. *No*.

My life spread out before me, a blankness. I fantasized about starting an Italian bakery, knowing deep down this was a pipe dream. And I brooded on the seven years I'd spent in a profession that had made it perfectly clear in the end that it didn't want me. What should I make of all those years? Part of me cried out that I'd been used up and spit out by an institution increasingly modeled after Fortune 500 companies; that the academy had taken advantage of my love for literature, dangling the carrot of a career before me for years, and all the while relying on me for a serflike labor that maximized its own profits, and freed radical professors — their very livelihood dependent on that contingent labor — to write "risky" papers they read aloud to one another at Marriott conference centers.

This analysis wasn't without validity, but it immobilized me. It was true that between 2008, when I entered grad school, and 2014, the number of tenure-track jobs in English had dropped by 43 percent. But I had known of this trend since at least 2010, and chosen to stay. I stayed because, as Walter White puts it, finally coming clean about his motives for cooking meth in the finale of *Breaking Bad*, "I liked it. I was good at it. And I was alive." I relished being part of this community of young intellectuals, the late nights in our offices geeking out over literature and ideas with people who would become among the best friends of my life. I loved the teaching, loved the soul-deepening reading and talking and writing.

Now it was over, and I saw that the only way to move on was to own this choice I'd made, and, having done so, exercise my freedom to confer meaning on these years. Only then could I lay claim to them and do a clear-eyed inventory of all they'd furnished me with. Only then could I grapple my way toward a vision of

grad school — its joys, its eventual horrors — that was less vengeful and more tolerantly Keatsian: Grad school had been a long, varied, and perilous expanse in the vale of my own soul's making. It had almost killed me, but it had also given me a more capacious intellect and — most vitally, I saw — it had made me a writer. I still had this one *techne* — writing, the sweet industry of it, the capacity, if I was lucky, to capture the attention of people who weren't academics, offering them some repast that was both pleasurable and provocative.

How should I go about refashioning my academic prose — that giant, rust-bitten Kubota tractor — into the sexy, top-down Jeep Wrangler that some nebulously defined "common reader" might want to take for a spin? I'd long prided myself on my prose, and wondered whether my writing had what it took to "make it on the outside." (It's natural for academics who daydream about escaping to reach for metaphors drawn from *The Shawshank Redemption*.)

I saw no clear-cut binary between public and academic writing, nor was it the case that one was inherently superior to the other. Some of the most beautiful, pellucid prose I knew belonged to JSTOR articles, even if it saddened me to think how few people would see it. Part of me bristled with indignation when I heard a nonacademic — a poet, a journalist — sneer at academic writing for being needlessly opaque or narcissistic. ("Have you *been* to an M.F.A. poetry reading lately?" I wanted to cry out.)

Even so, I had to admit that, deep down, I was incurably rankled by what felt like the willful insularity of so much writing I found in academic journals. Here were essays that argued for more inclusive, egalitarian social arrangements, but frequently did so in prose that — jargon-laden, byzantine — hardly screamed "inclusivity." Such language seemed a machinery to ward off the curious but uninitiated, or a way for writers to mark themselves as "academic," performing their mastery of the field's requisite tics like so many Airedales at a dog show. Of course, some jargon served an important purpose: It was a shorthand for loaded concepts that would take many pages to rehash — work that would be redundant for specialists. And, as many an academic writer will remind you, the opacity of their prose is a symptom of the complexity of the thought they're trading in. Fair enough; and yet it's fascinating to imagine these same academics telling, say, Rebecca Solnit or Ta-Nehisi Coates that they can't manage a comparable clarity, pathos, and beauty because *they* write about complex things.

Like so many literature scholars, I'd sought to do more than offer new readings of Blake and the Rossettis; I'd accepted on faith, as a key tenet of my cult, that the ultimate purpose of this writing was — even within the pages of journals like *Victorian Poetry* — to wield some politically destabilizing force. But who was listening, and what discernible effects would it achieve in the world? By what conduits? (I have, to date, never been emailed about any of my academic articles, nor has anyone mentioned one to me in a conversation.)

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Removed now from this world, I had no idea whether I could exercise any destabilizing impact, but I did have what no writer can ultimately afford to be without: a burning desire to communicate. Impelled by this, I began writing essays for magazines, an undertaking that proved at once challenging, cathartic, and liberating. I tried writing narrative nonfiction, approaching it with the brio of one who had nothing to lose. The experience forced me out of the largely analytical register in which I'd spent the previous 10 years, prompting me to write scenes with dialogue, action, and evocations of people. It reminded me I was a teller of stories, licensing me to generate suspense and humor; it made my job into that of an entertainer and not merely a dispassionate thinker.

One thing was certain: This new writing was tutoring me in a salubrious humility that academe — a cult of performed mastery and omniscience — seemed designed to stamp out. A certain humility might be inscribed in the form of the essay itself, as it's been historically imagined. What it calls for is not a force-feeding of literature or life into some predetermined theoretical framework it's meant to validate, but a patient waiting, an assaying of this path and then that one, unafraid of contradiction, alert to surprise: in short, a giving-over of oneself to the chance dictates of what Annie Dillard calls "the line of words," without knowing to what endpoint these will bear you.

The recent trajectory of my life had, if nothing else, imposed just such a receptivity on me. I am not alone among Ph.D.'s cut loose by academe — uprooted from our presumed life's path, flung onto a sea of violent contingency — in being routinely reminded of Shakespeare's late romances. These plays conjure characters who render themselves up to fortune, trusting that the vicissitudes of life, for all their terror, might waft them to some country stranger but altogether more marvelous than the one from which they came; that an obliterating loss might be a clearing for grace and new life to rush in; that, for those with faith in the curative power of second chances, snuffed-out breath might issue afresh.

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