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Boy of Envelopes

Doyle Wesley Walls
Pacific University

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Boy of Envelopes

Doyle Wesley Walls

William Faulkner, a "man of letters," gave a speech when he received his Nobel Prize for Literature. He spoke of noble abstractions: love, honor, pity, pride, compassion, sacrifice, courage, hope. But Faulkner told us elsewhere that before *The Sound and the Fury* was a novel it was a series of short stories, and before it was a series of short stories it was one short story, and before it was one short story it was a poetic image—a girl in muddy underpants up in a tree. Even the great man of letters was playing around with an image, some concrete thing, before he knew what it was he would say.

I do what I can in the creative writing classes I teach to discourage students from writing about abstractions such as love and friendship, that is, to concentrate on the vehicle and not the tenor of their poems. I encourage them to let go of whatever it is they think they want to write about and write with, or through, *things*, especially unusual, and possibly fresh, concrete nouns. That writing is process is not a new observation; nevertheless, it's a good one. The "truths" that student writers want and need to write will bubble to the top if they will take care of the music of their language. I credit Richard Hugo's thoughts along these lines in *The Triggering Town*. I cite Ezra Pound's dictums to make it new and to go in fear of abstractions. A new name doesn't mean much at the top of the same old poem.

Barnett and Stubbs, in their *Practical Guide to Writing*, say that good writing is a combination of doggedness and playfulness. In my experience, creative writing students in general need to be more dogged (about punctuation, grammar, usage), and expository writing students need to be more playful.

I do what I can to convince my students in expository writing classes to be more imaginative in their essays. An absence of errors does not constitute an "A" paper. Essay after essay of lifeless abstraction tends to make me exclaim, "Put a doughnut in it!" What grader, what reader, wants to face yet another batch of papers about abortion, affirmative action, the death penalty, or sex roles with titles like "Abortion," "Affirmative Action," "The Death Penalty," or "Sex Roles"? More and more I give this bit of instruction: Don't bore me. Years ago I had a paper from a student entitled "Sex Rolls." I turned to that paper with some high expectations only to find that I hadn't written the subject on

the chalkboard, so the student had only used "rolls" instead of "roles" by mistake. His paper didn't rise to the height of his misunderstanding, to what could have been the best paper in the batch. Worse yet are the personal essays entitled "Memories" or "Feelings." I want to see titles more like this title from John Ashbery: "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape."

There is cross-fertilization between the two realms of composition—creative and analytical. Creative writing students benefit from reading *The Elements of Style*, and not just for the purpose of learning punctuation or usage: consider the passage from Orwell on Ecclesiastes (the twentieth-century rewrite of Ecclesiastes embodies the worst academic cant); consider the injunction from Strunk and White to write with nouns and verbs as opposed to adjectives and adverbs (here is the creative writing workshop standard, "show, don't tell"). Both student essayists and student poets will write better work if they will load and bless their sentences in paragraphs and their lines in stanzas with nouns and verbs that show instead of adjectives and adverbs that tell.

Karl Shapiro dismissed distinctions drawn between poetry and prose, saying that there's only a matter of greater or less heat. I feel much the same about teaching writing. Whether it's a student's poem or essay, I want to be able to celebrate the heat of what's there the way Robert Frost, in his poem "A Considerable Speck," celebrates the mite on his page as he is writing. Frost was always happy to discover "On any sheet the least display of mind."

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., writes of a student of his at Iowa who wrote a story about a nun who got dental floss stuck in her teeth. The story, he writes, was about much more than just the dental floss, but everyone read that story with interest and read to the end because they wanted to know if the nun got the dental floss out of her teeth. The benefit of focusing on something small like dental floss is solid advice for all writers.

Among the most difficult concepts about writing for my students to accept are the following: that an essential component of writing is play; that they should heed Joseph Campbell's advice and "follow their bliss" (and that doesn't mean "do something important"; they must catch the pleasure implied in "bliss"); that they should trust "things" to help them communicate, not just wander off into abstraction; that they should focus on their senses no matter what truth they would teach (as writers as far apart as Friedrich Nietzsche and Flannery O'Connor taught us to do); that poems—and I say well-written essays—are made of words and not ideas (as Mallarmé had to inform a disgruntled Degas when Degas couldn't make his own verses work out though he had

many "ideas"); and that they should write out of their own lives in a lively and clear fashion about things they know to an audience they can visualize.

Because I mean what I say, I am forced to say my piece playfully, not just in lecture, not just by photocopying footnotes for them. I am forced, following my own instruction, to speak through things. I am forced to show, not merely tell. For years I have told creative writing classes on the first day of class that this creative writing class will be far more than my holding up a paper clip or a Coke bottle and encouraging them to write about such objects "creatively." These days I'm less judgmental about that old approach. Have you considered the shapes, sizes, colors, and materials of the latest paper clips? One of the most successful student poems I've seen in recent years was a conceit built on the design of the "catch the wave" Coke can. This erotic poem from a female science major sent a gentle shock wave through campus.

I pulled slowly, without even thinking about what I was doing, on one of those standard small envelopes (3-5/8 x 6-1/2) and pulled it apart, all flaps out. A couple of days later, among the many papers on my desk, I noticed the envelope positioned, by chance, on top of a regular sheet of typing paper. When I held the typing sheet horizontally, the undone envelope would just almost fit in its entirety on that sheet—with the side flaps out in the northwest and south-southeast corners, top flap of the envelope toward the top of the horizontal typing sheet, bottom flap toward the bottom. I traced around the envelope to get the pattern. Why would I do this when I had so many other *important* things to do that might distinguish me in an intellectual sense, make me more the man to reckon with? Why was I fooling around like a boy with a kite? Delight in form, I suppose. The homemade envelope is a nonce form, shaped verse, a concrete poem. Any envelope is an egg for the sperm, a womb for the baby, a house for the children.

In a newsletter from the Northwest Writing Institute, Kim Stafford passes along a quotation he took from a talk given to writing teachers by Donald Graves: "There are too many essays written to no one. The origin of the essay is the letter. Writing needs to be active, needs to move out and go to someone real."

Schopenhauer made this trenchant comment: "If you want to discover your true opinion of anybody, observe the impression made on you by the first sight of a letter from him." Of course the first thing you see is not the letter but the envelope.

Decorating envelopes, even making them, is not new, of course. My brother once wrote an article for his newspaper about prisoners at the local county jail who were decorating envelopes with whatever

materials were at hand. They dissolve an M&M in a spoon filled with water to make their paint and use the frayed end of a matchstick for a brush.

Graduate school was the institution where I first felt the need to break out and create some envelopes myself. Pent-up aggression, perhaps, was why I found myself wandering around one day with a hole punch in my hand. I riddled a long, white envelope with holes. Why? I didn't do it with any purpose in mind. Perhaps I'd just heard some professional trained in the humanities with a special emphasis on language use his or her rhetoric in a brutal way toward a colleague, a guest speaker, or one of my fellow graduate students. Days later I realized, upon glancing again at that holey envelope, that I could place a sheet of red paper—the color of blood—inside it for the stationery. Were Nietzsche still alive I could have sent this envelope to him, since he wanted to read only that which a man had written with his blood. I wrote my correct address at the position on the envelope for the return address, but above the address I gave, for my name, the name "Clyde Barrow." A woman, of course, could use the name "Bonnie Parker."

But aside from transforming pre-existing envelopes into something else, it was the idea of making photocopies that could be easily cut, folded, and glued into envelopes that I happened upon.

The simple point here is that I figured out how to place visuals on a sheet of clean typing paper in just the right spot so that, once the photocopy of the master came out of the machine, I could trace the pattern of the unfolded envelope over the photocopy and cut out that pattern. Once folded and glued, the homemade envelope sports whatever it is I had visualized for the envelope, front or back.

The slightly more complex point—yet still simple enough to be worthwhile—is that this enterprise is analogous in many respects to lessons teachers of creative writing try to communicate to students about the writing of poems; for example, a common method for generating poems, the amount of work involved, the audience, the response.

Just as the smoker rises from bed reaching for a cigarette, both the academic involved in research and the classroom teacher often rise looking to make a photocopy. Just imagine the strain on the photocopy machine at a graduate institution: all those eager academics-to-be photocopying enough pages to fill boxes full of essays on Foucault and Derrida, adding articles toward "the New Nietzsche." And then here I come with a great black-and-white visual of the Venus de Milo from a *New Yorker* ad with no other purpose in mind than to make a mixed media envelope for a friend who also enjoys Ferlinghetti's poem "I Am

Waiting." Students from the art department understand. They do such things. But too many of my academic colleagues look at the photocopy machine I'm using out of the corners of their eyes and knit their eyebrows. (Or is it that their eyebrows are permanently knit?) Shades of the prison-house long ago began to close upon them. Perhaps the photocopying for envelopes does the photocopy machine just as much good as it does me and, I hope, the friend who receives the letter-and-envelope package. Perhaps the machines run longer if they are given some time to play, especially during the unbearably heavy hours of being serious.

The sense of play involved in creation often makes creative writers look like goof-offs to those among us in academe who consider themselves more "serious." But this kind of play is part of the writer's work. Jane Smiley has praised "Idle Hands" in an essay by that name. Even an intellect like Bertrand Russell writes an essay entitled "In Praise of Idleness." Virginia Woolf says it this way in chapter two of *A Room of One's Own*: "Drawing pictures [as opposed to conclusions] was an idle way of finishing an unprofitable morning's work. Yet it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top." And in his review of Mario Vargas Llosa's novella, *In Praise of the Stepmother*, John Updike writes of "the contemplative solitude and part-time irresponsibility necessary for artistic creation."

This is a classic division we find more and more in academe as creative writers become a greater force in English departments. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf presents Mr. Ramsay, whose "splendid mind" reaches "the letter Q." But he can't go beyond Q. Woolf writes that Ramsay sees the following:

... that old, that obvious distinction between the two classes of men; on the one hand the steady goers of super-human strength who, plodding and persevering, repeat the whole alphabet in order, twenty-six letters in all, from start to finish; on the other the gifted, the inspired who, miraculously, lump all the letters together in one flash—the way of genius.

I do not scoff at Mr. Ramsay's work. It's a long way to Q. I respect hard work. In *Nausea*, Sartre's Roquentin notices that the "Self-Taught Man" is teaching himself alphabetically: he's only up to "L." What I do scoff at is the all-too-common attitude from the majority in academe which asserts that certain kinds of work—especially the "plodding and persevering" varieties—are more important than other kinds. That attitude strikes me as exceedingly ludicrous when I think of the scholars whose work rests upon the shoulders of writers who play. And here I can expand upon the general rule I stated above. Student poets need to be more dogged, and student essayists need to be more playful; similarly,

creative writers need to read voraciously and critically to expand their knowledge, and academics need to loosen up a bit in order to learn what there is to know from that zone Frost called "the wild free ways of wit and art," specifically, if for no other reason, than to avoid this problem that Frost has identified: "One of the dangers of college to anyone who wants to stay a human reader (that is to say a humanist) is that he will become a specialist and lose his sensitive fear of landing on the lovely too hard. (With beak and talon.)"

This macho one-upmanship, practiced by both men and women in academe, is all around us, and it takes several forms. Consider the hierarchy of places. England, for example, is more literary than America. And Paris is more poetic than Pittsburgh. But if you have to be in America, then the East Coast is certainly more literary than the West Coast. With her Guggenheim year in front of her, Carolyn Forché considered her travel options. She received advice from friends: go to Paris, they said, you're a poet. Or at least, they told her, go to New England "to become a real poet." Instead, like a real writer and not a pretender, she took the unusual route. She went to El Salvador, and powerful poetry was the result. In addition to place, time is also susceptible to one-upmanship. Any writing from the past is more literary than any contemporary writing—unless, in academe, you're talking critical theory. Anything dead is more literary than anything alive. Why the hell, the attitude seems to be, are those know-nothings trying to write poems?! Don't they understand the concept of blue-chip stock?

This one-upmanship I'm speaking of is anti-play, anti-new, anti-creation. It's a slave to tradition and the traditional; it's a slave to the mind over the heart; it's a critical disease. In academe that which cannot be easily quantified in terms of SAT scores, GRE scores, I.Q., or degrees earned is soft, subjective, suspect. This unfortunate (and false) division between scholars (or theorists) and creative writers of any stripe is addressed by W. D. Snodgrass in his poem "April Inventory," where the scholars "speak authority / And wear their ulcers on their sleeves. . . ." The speaker sees other values, including gentleness and loveliness. While he hasn't "read one book about / A book or memorized one plot," he sees the "scholars / Get the degrees, the jobs, the dollars." Yeats speaks to this problem in his poem "Adam's Curse," where we read that the poet, who will "articulate sweet sounds together," will work harder than those who "scrub a kitchen pavement" or "break stones," yet the poet will "Be thought an idler by the noisy set / Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen. . . ." Frost does not hesitate to say it: "Poetry is play. If you forget that you're a fraud." We in creative writing go to the

workshop in order to learn how to play. That's our job. We need more concrete lessons concerning "How to Play," not merely scholarly papers on play that are drudgery to read. We need to have our students stop and play, force them, in fact, to play at making something new, something fresh, with new materials, to engage in a kind of activity of making that is analogous to the creation of a word text.

Not only can the palpable feel of a word—as opposed to its definition—suggest a poem (as in Helen Chasin's poem "The Word Plum"), but the palpable dumb thing itself can too. Camus wrote this in his notebook: "People can think only in images. If you want to be a philosopher, write novels." Say these words with William Carlos Williams—No ideas but in things. A friend in graduate school told me her creative writing teacher at Brown, R. V. Cassill, I believe it was, didn't have his creative writing class keep a journal, at least in her one class; they kept a collection of things. Stuff. Odds and ends. Junk. Gizmos. Strings. Wires. Movie posters. Who did they think they were? Kurt Schwitters? Richard Kostelanetz? Wallace Stevens? All these phenomena, as Marianne Moore might say, are important.

Nordstrom's department store once ran an advertisement in the newspaper that showed the shoes worn by some famous movie stars in particular movies. The picture that caught my eye bore this caption: Elizabeth Taylor's Shoes in *Cleopatra*. I photocopied the portion of the ad that showed the elaborate shoes, Ms. Taylor's feet and her legs to mid-calf, and the caption. I placed this photocopy on my office door. Two weeks later I took the photocopy to class, held it up, and asked the members of the workshop to tell me what this picture made them think of. One woman immediately said, "Pain." I was taken aback. I'd been looking at the photocopy for over two weeks, and I had thought only of pleasure. Her response and my own were limited. As it turned out, a great discussion ensued concerning eroticism and equity. Because we had started with the thing itself, the high heels, instead of a topic, both males and females found themselves defending something before we discovered the general and much-discussed category we were heading toward: sexism. Males defended and berated high heels; females did the same, according to their beliefs and passions. Students brought up related details: cologne, perfume, lipstick, necklaces and chains, earrings for pierced ears and other jewelry for pierced parts of the body, make-up, hair sprays, tattoos, lingerie. We didn't come to any definite conclusions, but we were onto something tactile and alive. John Keats never told us which kind of shoe would be best for carrying on with our mysteries, uncertainties, and doubts. Perhaps a track shoe would best suit the needs of negative capability. A discussion of high heels will be

a long distance discussion, and it will require an agility that those light, tight, spiked track shoes can provide.

Far more challenging and exciting essays and poems can come from such thing-oriented stimuli than from floating out the "Sex Roles" paper topic or having students write poems about their views on feminism. I had originally photocopied the drawing of Taylor's shoes in an attempt to follow my bliss, with no particular pedagogical idea in mind, thinking only that I would look at the photocopy often. I have been telling students ever since that "Elizabeth Taylor's Shoes in Cleopatra" would make a great title for a poem or essay. Who wouldn't read a piece—poem or essay—with that title? Of course, the seductive title could lure many readers to the student's larger aims, if any.

Almost twenty years ago a student of mine came to my office and told me she couldn't write a "process" theme because she couldn't think of anything she could do that she could describe. What she could do, she claimed, was just average, boring stuff and certainly wouldn't make for an interesting essay. We talked for some time about what she did in school and, better yet, what she did out of school. One of the facts of her life was that she worked at a hamburger joint to make money for tuition. Later in the conversation, having already established her daily routine for me, she began to laugh and started telling me about something that had recently happened at work. The milk shake machine had broken down; no one knew how to fix it, and the lunch crowd would be hitting the door soon. She said she began tinkering with the machine when the manager gave up on it. She took the machine apart, examining each piece and remembering where it went. In short, she had the milk shake machine working, to the amazement of the staff and in time for the lunch crowd. I watched in amazement as this very shy student explained—through this thing, the milk shake machine—how she could attack a problem with her intellect and solve it. Our talk seemed to do a good bit for her self-esteem. She would have told this story to her mother in a letter home, in a letter where she could be herself, but she was sure this information wasn't worth mentioning to her English teacher at the university. To a writer, a milk shake machine is every bit as important as truth, justice, and the American way. My student not only outlined her paper, she taught herself something about how capable she was as she planned out the theme before me.

In May of 1990, my wife, a puppeteer, attended a convention of puppeteers where Jim Henson had been scheduled to speak. For some reason he was not able to attend. Then just two weeks later he met his untimely death. My wife had long admired his work; she was greatly saddened by the news. (I had felt a similar loss when Groucho Marx

died.) What interests me here, however, is that my wife was somewhat depressed by the theorizing that dominated the sessions she attended at the convention. She tells me that when people used to ask Henson what he had in mind when he was creating Kermit, he told them that he had nothing in particular in mind; he was just playing around with material from his mother's old coat and some ping-pong balls. Fortunately for us, Henson hadn't lost, as Aristotle says most of us do as we grow older, the child's sense of wonder. It's this sense of play, Richard Hugo tells us, that found a cure for venereal disease. Sir Alexander Fleming was looking at mold, and soon we had a cure for gonorrhea; he wasn't answering a command from the British government to find a cure for gonorrhea. Through this example Hugo tells us that such focusing on the small and concrete will lead to larger discoveries.

The making of envelopes takes time. In that sense it's like the making of a poem. And what do you get? A made thing, something about the size of most poems. The attention to detail is the same. The smallest touches are there for a reason. This relates to this, connects to this, and expands that. The concern for quality is the same. Why all this work? some ask. Envelopes are already made for you. Yes, I say, and so are greeting cards. All I really need do to communicate, according to my culture, is spend a couple of dollars for a generic card and envelope and then sign my name and lick a stamp. Tess Gallagher has written disparagingly of "paper-plate poetry." I enjoy sending something through the mail someone might think is worth saving. Many poets speak of writing hundreds of versions, even writing through a ream of paper, on one poem. Some products come quicker than others, but each demands its own fee of patience from the maker.

The making of envelopes stresses the idea of an audience at the other end of the writing. Emily Dickinson may not have actively sought publication the way many poets do today, but she would write in a poem that this is my letter to the world. And the expository writer certainly writes with someone else in mind. All too often, the student writer feels that the assignment is written in an academic vacuum. Consequently, the student "utilizes" (rather than "uses") the dry, puffed-up, academic language he or she is presented in academe.

The person who sees the product, the homemade envelope, may treat it like any other utterance, like junk mail. Hard to tell, but worth a try. To whom do you mail personal letters anyway? That fit audience though few. For that matter, how many people read the poems published in the little magazines? One friend wrote me that her letter carrier said my envelope, which he delivered one day under the hot Texas sun, had made his load lighter.

A 10-cent U. S. stamp quotes John Donne: "Letters mingle souls." They do so in a classic, concrete way. The telephone call disappears like smoke. I like phone calls, but I prefer them no more than I prefer microfiche to a fine press book I hold in my hands. And E-Mail—which I find most convenient, which I use—has neither the voice I hear over the phone nor an envelope that carries the letter. Of course, E-Mail is a great boon to one kind of communication; but the sig is not the same thing as a signature in an aesthetically pleasing hand. Beware even our good friends at the U. S. Post Office: in their attempt to speed up the delivery of our mail, they are now telling us how to address envelopes—exactly how to fill out the address and exactly where we can place it; for example, in terms of the "how," we are no longer to place a comma between the city and the state. I'm of two minds on this issue. I want clarity: good god, I want the receiver to get the message. So, yes, communication is the sacred point; but not at the cost of leaving individuality and grace behind. Let there be no nixies piled up at the post office; but let it be because we've learned to discipline our hands to create unique letters and numbers worthy of calligraphy while they are, simultaneously, models of clarity.

The envelope I have created says *I know who you are*. That's why I've sent you this particular homemade envelope: you see the 25-cent "Love" stamp with the pink rose and you see, swirling around this "Love" stamp, the Beatles' single "All You Need Is Love." (No need to reduce or enlarge; singles are exactly the right size.)

We took philosophy classes together, or you've just finished your graduate degree in philosophy. That's why I've had to make this envelope, which reproduces a reproduction of Jacques Louis David's *The Death of Socrates* (thanks to a great visual provided by the Book-of-the-Month Club for their advertisement concerning I. F. Stone's *The Trial of Socrates*). A bubble extends to the left of Socrates that says "Take a letter, Plato, and mail it to:" and leaves space for your name and address. (The "E" stamp with a picture of "Earth" worked perfectly here—until postage went up from 25 cents!—since Socrates was a citizen of the world.) This envelope asserts your importance. Socrates had your name on his lips just moments before he tasted the hemlock.

You are the editor who accepted my poem based on an experience I had at a Holiday Inn when I was in junior high school. So I'll send you an envelope made by photocopying the backside of a post card from that motel. This homemade envelope clearly calls itself a "POSTCARD." I'll place a post card stamp, sufficient postage for a post card, in the square that says "PLACE STAMP HERE" and then add, to the right, just off the photocopy of the post card, but still on the envelope, another

stamp to bump the letter up to the necessary first-class rate requirement. It's like blurring the distinction between poetry and prose.

I know who you are. You're the friend who has been receiving this stuff from me for some time now, so we'll up the ante for you. Here's an envelope and the stationery inside made on a photocopy machine where I've photocopied nothing. It's more or less a blank white sheet, yet there are always a few black spots in the photocopy. I try to be receptive to what's at hand, incorporate those black spots, let them suggest something: I'll use one as the dot for an "i"; I'll incorporate one or two in an ellipsis or an umlaut.

I like to send a homemade envelope with letter to one person inside a larger standard envelope with letter to another person. Send the large one to an uncle, for example, and ask him to place the enclosed envelope and letter on your cousin's bed for her to find as if it were a piece of mail found in the mailbox that morning. The enclosed, smaller envelope looks authentic on first glance, that is, it looks like something that has been sent through the mail, but it's not. Closer examination reveals an unusual stamp, one for Prince's *Purple Rain*, from the many stamps given me in the mail by the club that wants me to pick several compact discs and join up. You can draw in the cancellation marks. Coins can be used to make the two circles. Draw in the wavy lines.

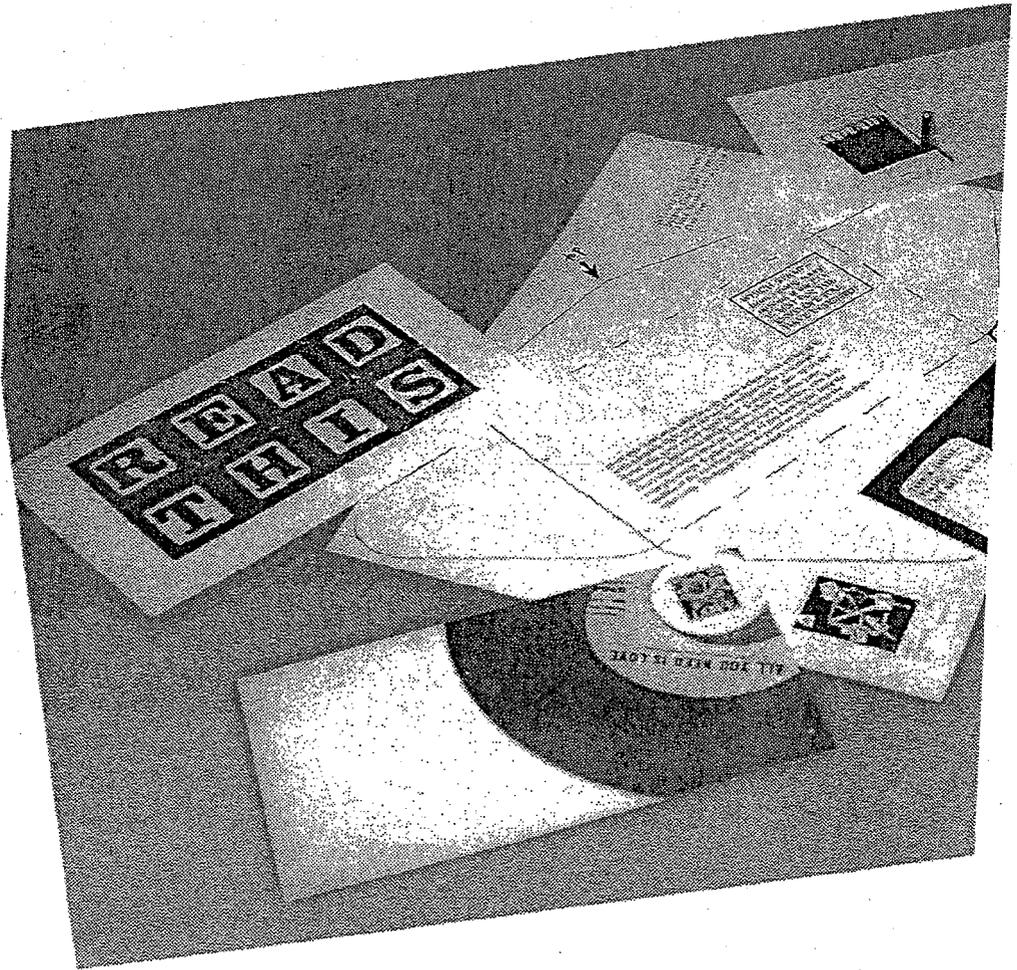
More and more these days I find myself writing letters. I send letters so that I might use the envelopes I've made. Poets play with various forms; these forms lead them to discoveries, lead them to say things they didn't know they would say. Making envelopes leads me into writing letters, helps me mingle with the souls I know and love. I have envelopes to spare. And sometimes there's absolutely nothing to say inside them. In Fellini's *8 1/2*, Marcello Mastroianni, playing Guido, a film director, sings, "I really have nothing to say" and then states resolutely, "but I want to say it just the same."

My making envelopes on the photocopy machine strikes me now as a rebellious enterprise; I'm trying my best to fuse the worlds I straddle, the analytical and creative. I want to unite my two worlds as my two eyes make one in sight. I would no more gather up my collection of stuff and move away from the photocopy machine to make way for the "serious" scholar than I would expect the speaker in Robert Frost's "Two Tramps in Mud Time" to surrender his ax to the two tramps who wanted to split his wood for pay.

The image of the muddy underpants precedes the noble sentiments. The boy of envelopes is father of the man of letters.



Doyle Wesley Walls teaches at Pacific University.



WRITING ON THE EDGE

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