The IMAGINATIVE ARGUMENT

A Practical Manifesto for Writers

FRANK L. CIOFFI

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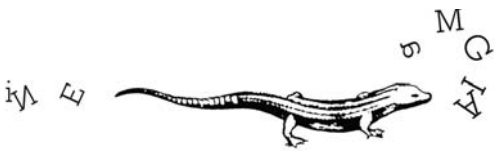

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FOR KATHLEEN CIOFFI

whose love exceeds imagination, and whose courage
and insight brook no argument

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Writing isn't about talent. It's about devotion,
it's about practice.

—Naomi Shihab Nye

Not he is great who can alter matter, but he
who can alter my state of mind.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson,
"The American Scholar"

By imagination the architect sees the unity of a building not yet begun, and the inventor sees the unity and varied interactions of a machine never yet constructed, even a unity that no human eye can ever see, since when the machine is in actual motion, one part may hide the connecting parts, and yet all keep the unity of the inventor's thought. By imagination a Newton sweeps sun, planets, and stars into unity with the earth and the apple that is drawn irresistibly to its surface, and sees them all within the circle of one grand law. Science, philosophy, and mechanical invention have little use for fancy, but the creative, penetrative power of imagination is to them the breath of life, and the condition of all advance and success.

—*Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language*

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PREFACE

Written argument, which logically explains and defends a controversial idea, seems to be disappearing as a form of discourse. Here I offer a manifesto for the protection, for the nurturance, of this endangered species. Why? Because argument deserves to survive and flourish. It should be taught more rigorously in schools, in colleges and universities. It should enter the public conversation, informing and being informed by ordinary human feelings and actions. An essential part of a complex web of culture, argument shares an environment with analysis, evaluation, understanding, knowledge. Yet it's too often shackled and bound by the immuring vocabulary of Greek words, life-sentenced to the dustiness of classrooms, relegated to the aerie-like confines of the Ivory Tower or cinderblock facsimiles thereof: the mad-discipline in the attic—or on the very edge of campus, anyway!

This manifesto calls not so much for revolution, as for evolution, or at least reform: a reenvisioning of what writers and scholars, producers of ideas and creators of new knowledge, ought to be doing and ought to be teaching others. It also calls for you, the writer, to do something perhaps a little different from what you've previously been taught.

"Argument" and "imagination" are not typically (or at least not traditionally) conjoined, but doing so infuses written argument with value. You need not only to imagine an audience but to imagine what kinds of questions that audience might raise. You also need to imagine what does not at present exist: a response that truly emerges from within yourself, and that would therefore be different from anything else yet written or thought, as different as each individual is from every other. And further, if such a process takes place, you will acknowledge and take into account the viewpoints of others. This process, I'm arguing here, will advance knowledge as it pro-

motes your own understanding; in addition, it's a process that values and validates the individual as he or she emerges within a context of a larger, projected audience—the group to which that individual speaks, and whose influence constrains, limits, and at the same time engenders the very creativity of the solitary mind.

The organizing idea behind this volume is not just the argument but the "imaginative argument." Look up "imaginative argument" in a search engine—all of the hits use the term as if it were an absolute, a summum bonum. And yet how rarely is imagination taught in conjunction with argument! I want to stress that writers always have choices about how to say things, about what to say, about when to say what. Unlike social situations, which call for very quick thinking and occasional blurting out of the wrong thing or suppression of the right response—you know, until twenty minutes later, when it's too late—writing is something that you can think about, revise, recast, or expeditiously handle with the "delete" key. I am trying to suggest in the following pages that you as a writer should attempt to form not just an argument about an issue, a text, a situation, but an *imaginative* argument—one that (perhaps) has not been offered many times before, one that (perhaps) involves a new use of language or ideas, one that (perhaps) employs a novel range or mix of source materials. Or something else—really, who knows what?—it's imaginative, unforeseeable. And you are not doing this just to be weird and ornery; rather, you are trying to see the issue in a new way—a way that will be interesting, partly because it's unexpected, but at the same time graspable and credible because it is offered in a formal, serious, logically structured manner.

Here's how I would characterize the status quo: you, the proverbial student in the chair, do not want to write argument. You do not want to risk statements that could be attacked, refuted, made mockery of—or even assertions that you hold so strongly they provide a point of vulnerability. And your timidity is not a surface timidity: it goes as deeply into your mind as it does into your educational past. You've been schooled to tread the paper path of least resistance; to repeat ideas that you've been indoctrinated with; to parrot even the language of authorities you supposedly value; to rarely attack a problem from a fresh, vital vantage point, or even look at it through a personal, quirky, inventively eccentric optic.

But I want you to do more than just sit there. A lot more. One of your most important intellectual endeavors should be figuring out what you genuinely feel and think about something. Don't just try to anticipate what others might want you to think—or even what people you respect and admire might themselves think or want you to think. Determine your own angle, your own true beliefs. This takes some ingenuity. It is not easy to say what you think or feel about complex issues. If it were, they wouldn't be complex issues. In a way, writing argument consists in looking at evidence that supports both what attracts you about something and what you might find confusing, repulsive, elusive; it consists in trying to figure out, as you sort through contradictory evidence, what it is that matters—not just to you, but to an audience as interested, as invested, as you are.

Against me stands a long and still flourishing tradition of repeating the already-established and oft-reiterated. Indeed, much of our educational system envisions the dispensing of such truth—"facts"—as its primary goal. Charles Dickens's famous pedagogue from *Hard Times*, Thomas Gradgrind, embodies this teaching philosophy:

> "Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else." (1)

Surely Dickens exaggerates for humorous effect. But now 150 years later, many people still believe in a Gradgrindian educational philosophy. Recently, when I was team-teaching a course on political theory, I was asked to lecture about writing. I basically presented (in vastly compressed form) what follows in this volume you are now holding. I explained how it was necessary to have not just an argument but an imaginative argument; how my auditors needed to form their own ideas and make their own judgments; how they needed to see the texts as being ones that spoke to them as those texts spoke from a remote past; how each generation, indeed, each individual, must come to terms with those texts and must argue why those terms matter to an audience. The professor in charge of the course, who had been looking uncomfortable for the entire eight minutes I was speaking, stood up quickly at the bell. She said, "Yes, yes, that's all true. But we also want to make sure that in your papers it's clear that you GOT IT, that you've

understood the texts." What she wanted was, in a word, belief—and catechistic proof thereof.

I know that many institutions within our culture strongly resist change, do not encourage Doubting Thomas figures, and demand, instead, just this kind of belief. Seventeenth-century Irish poet John Denham wrote a couplet characterizing this position—the exact opposite to my own—and in the mid–nineteenth century, the grammarian Goold Brown quotes Denham with approbation:

> Those who have dealt most in philological controversy have well illustrated the couplet of Denham:
>
> > The Tree of Knowledge, blasted by disputes
> > Produces sapless leaves in stead of fruits. (iii)

For Denham, as for Brown, the facts of knowledge are inviolate—only damaged by debate, undermined, rendered lifeless or sterile by "gainsayers." He suggests here (and elsewhere in the 1668 poem "The Progress of Learning" Brown quotes from) that controversy weakens any understanding of divine creation, fatally blights "The Tree of Knowledge." Disputatiousness "blasts" away its beauty and wonder. Instead of having something we can hold on to, eat from, benefit from, we have a ravaged tree, on its way toward death. In short, Denham and Brown make a plea for the value of knowledge unencumbered by debate and controversy.

This quasi-Gradgrindian conception of knowledge not only informs the philosophy of many teachers today (who want to make sure that you've "GOT IT") but generally appeals to authority figures because it allows them to claim an unimpeachable authority. I'd argue that when authority figures take this position, you probably have good reason to distrust them, whether they be teachers or writers, the media or the Supreme Court, your favorite Web site or the president. To squelch chat limits freedom of thought, limits freedom. Goold Brown evidently wanted just that kind of unimpeachable authority, writing for an audience that he felt needed to know the precepts—the "facts"—of English grammar, rather than all the anxiety-provoking controversies surrounding those precepts (probably my political theorist colleague felt the same about her role in our class).

By contrast, I expect a little more than "facts." The genre of argu-

ment demands more than just evidence that you as students "GOT IT"—as in *fact*, the facts themselves often need to be argued for, or are under some dispute, and the "it" (of "got it")—a notoriously slippery entity—eludes, gambols, dances away at the touch of an eyebeam or the utterance of a single remark. "It" must be captured, coaxed, looked at from many angles, and possibly unmasked. In short, I argue here that the truth consists not so much of an "it," or of "facts," as of propositions that need to be defended and proven to be—provisionally, within a certain sociohistorical context—true.

While this is not the place to enter the debate about the relative nature of truth, it seems to me profoundly essential to question and think about how truths are arrived at. Lewis Carroll contends, in a memorable exchange between Alice and Humpty Dumpty, that the powerful make the truth; they can make words mean whatever they want them to mean:

> "When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
>
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
>
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all." (274)

I know this might at first appear sinister, but I see it in a positive way. The power that Humpty alludes to can reside within you as the writer: you are master. You can persuade others of your position, even though you do not have billions of dollars, or enormous influence in the media, or a job in the White House's West Wing. You can establish a truth via arguing for it.

Establishing a truth involves negotiating its terms; it involves other minds, other subjectivities. Is there a truth "out there" that you can "discover"? Maybe, maybe not. As Wallace Stevens writes, "Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the." But just because there might be no eternal truth—or if there is, it's ever-elusive—this doesn't mean we all live in solipsistic, subjective, closed-off universes, either, worlds where we just make up whatever we want. Indeed, while our subjectivities are rarely congruent, they surprisingly often overlap, intersect, or asymptotically approach each other. Your

job as a writer is to push the borders of your own subjectivity in the direction of others, just as you simultaneously determine where others' subjective worlds touch, overlap, and impinge on your own. I can't promise you that the truth you discover will be apodictic or eternal, or even that all these subjectivities neatly interlock, but your argument, your work—if it's been done honestly and thoroughly—will have the capacity to make an impact and effect change, not only on others but also on you, on your world.

A very fundamental human act undergirds and empowers this activity of arguing for truth. It's one that you see in children all the time, one that might even be annoying: the relentless asking of questions of all kinds. Just as a child might ask again and again, "Why?" until the parent finally shushes him or her with a "Because that's the way it works," or "Just because. Now leave me alone!" so you as thinkers and writers should be asking question upon question. You should be terminally curious; your curiosity should follow you to your graves. (I'll let you imagine the kinds of epitaphs this might engender.) You should ask questions that will help you understand, assess, contextualize, make sense of a given situation, a given idea, text, or topic. And these questions should reach outward—"What do others say?"—at the same time that they should delve within: "How do I feel about this?" Questioning allows you to open yourself to possibilities—an action that characterizes genuinely creative thought.

"Opening yourself" means that you must scrutinize, if you can, all of your preconceptions, your closely held beliefs, even your notions of good and bad, of evil and saintly, of right and wrong. You shouldn't let these notions ossify into hardened cerebral monuments. You should be constantly interrogating them, problematizing them—at least in your writing, if not in your life. In the process of asking questions, provided that they really probe the issues, you suddenly recognize your personal stake in the topic. No longer is writing about *x* or *y* a dry, or for that matter wet, perspiration-inducing academic exercise, but rather a way of discovering and inventing your "take" about something—and then wanting to share that with others, wanting to transform their subjective worlds as you define and reshape your own.

In some sense, then, what follows here is a book not only about

how to make arguments, how to structure them in formal writing, and how to use your language to make them vivid, memorable, striking, and forceful. It's not just meant to set out some rules that can be followed like formulas or flowcharts. It's also, I hope, a book that tries to inspire you to want to write argument *because argument matters*. It's a book about creativity, a book about how to identify and imagine a present and a future audience for one's ideas.

But will any of these ideas survive twenty, thirty, five hundred years? A colleague of mine, Teresa Vilardi, recently asked this very question of a group of forty or so writing teachers, and we were all much unsettled. Is a book about writing necessarily ephemeral, since it engages issues of pedagogy, which seem lodged in a bounded, narrow time stratum? How will these discussions of the Internet, of doing on-line research, of writing in university courses, of style and fallacies and figures of speech, play out when no books are published, when brick-and-mortar universities have ceased to exist, when ever-more-scarily interactive versions of the Internet become the major conduit of entertainment, information, and knowledge, and when education has taken on a form that we, primitive denizens of the double 0's of the twenty-first century, can now hardly imagine? I'm not sure. But I expect that many human qualities—in fact, most of what we are now—will perdure and last; and still in the future, as in the past, people will have varying degrees of creativity, independence of mind, confidence in themselves, originality.

So let me offer this manifesto-like assertion, which I'm hoping will be as applicable a hundred years hence as it was a hundred years ago, or as it is today: cherish your curiosity, your individual insight—even if it hurts. To adopt an argumentative way of thought is to be intellectually alive, constantly wondering, thinking; it's tantamount to existing in a realm of provisionality and uncertainty, to seething, almost to enduring a kind of disease. I know this is more than merely unsettling. And I hasten to add that it has become an essential part of our worldview. Playwright Tom Stoppard succinctly captures this idea in his play *Jumpers*: "Copernicus cracked our confidence and Einstein smashed it: for if one can no longer believe that a twelve-inch ruler is always a foot long, how can one be sure of relatively less certain propositions, such as that God made the Heaven

and the Earth?" (74). When our own confidence is cracked, it augurs loss; it provokes instability, anxiety, even alarm. That's in part why you hate to make arguments. That's why many teachers adopt Gradgrind's philosophy and why so many of you remain rooted to your chairs, listening to the "facts."

But let's join Stoppard and abandon "confidence." Instead, look toward anxiety as a tool for thought. Anxiety—about the way things work, about the way things seem to be, about how to explain a book, a person, or a universe—forms the basis for writing argument, for creating new knowledge. I wanted to write that all the important new knowledge—the new discoveries, breakthroughs, and inventions—are still to come, are yet to emerge in a distant if hazy future. I'm just not sure that's true. It might be. But think about the future, for it is your writing that will help create it, and before you can create it, you must challenge not only the present but your own capacity to supersede it.

* * *

The chapters that follow—on audience, invention, the thesis, the writing process, research, style—all strive to persuade you that having an argument is necessary, but not quite sufficient; good, but not quite good enough. You have to have an imaginative argument. Chapter 1 defines the genre and differentiates it from other nonfiction writing. Chapter 2, on audience, suggests that as you envision your audience, you simultaneously create it by offering readers not what they expect but what they really want: new knowledge. Chapter 3, on the writing process, strives to show how one must actively work toward creation of an essay of the kind being suggested: it's not something that emerges, Athena-like, whole from one's brain; it must be thought about, imagined, tested out, revised. Chapters 4 and 5, which cover the idea of thesis, lay out conventional thesis strategies and show how these often function as only "pseudo-theses"—and as such are deficient. By contrast, the truly argumentative thesis is more potentiality than actuality—and serves to open up new areas of questioning. Chapter 6 examines the paragraph—a paper in miniature. Expanding on the paper in miniature, chapters 7 and 8 discuss structure and development of the entire essay, claim-

ing that the key to creating strong, argumentative papers is, first, to pose the most interesting kinds of questions—and then to attempt answering the most provocative, most unanswerable question of them all: what I term the "macro-question." Chapter 9 examines a special version of the argument, the research paper, showing how the best research makes you, the writer/researcher, change your mind and arrive at new insights in the process.

Chapters 10 and 11 stress the need to say things in an imaginative and forceful way. Chapter 10, for example, covers some figures of speech and demonstrates how to use various rhetorical patterns in order to give your language greater impact. It also lays out logical fallacies, ways of "cheating at argument" that I suggest you learn to recognize in others and avoid in your own work—they should not be used by responsible writers. Their use in fact represents, at best, intellectual complaisance; at worst, a demented version of imagination. Chapter 11, on style, offers ways to craft a distinctive, interesting style, including both prohibitions and suggestions. I provide eleven brief snippets of essays by renowned stylists and show what makes them worthy of inclusion here—indeed, worthy of awe. In a concluding chapter to this "practical manifesto," I urge you to embrace a version of fuzzy logic that I call "fuzzy subjectivity"—a new way of thinking and imagining that has the capacity to effect change.

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Writing a book of this kind recalls and revivifies many people from my past to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. My late parents, Nan and Lou Cioffi, met in a creative writing class at New York University and aspired to be great writers. They inculcated in me and my twin brother, Grant—to whom I also owe incalculable thanks—an abiding respect for the written word and love for the literary, the artistic, and the beautiful. My uncle, also named Frank Cioffi, who assumed the role of my intellectual father when my own father died in 1968, has had an influence on me and my thinking that is too enormous to estimate. I often quote him in the following pages, and his spirit hovers in some sense above this all. I hope he forgives me errors in my own logic, my limited scope, my too-oft-infelicitous phrasing. On him, hence on me, the influence of his wife, my Aunt Nalini, has also been profound: to her I extend thanks beyond measure.

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* * *

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