

## Revisiting the Personal Essay with Ben Hamper's *Rivethed*

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THE PERSONAL ESSAY—a paper in which a student brings in his or her own experience or concerns—is probably familiar to most historians. Teaching at the City University of New York, I have found grading personal essays somewhat perplexing. They are sometimes written in response to an assignment that does not call for personal reflection. And it can be difficult to determine if a student who discusses his or her personal struggles is doing so for the first time for a particular paper. On the other hand, such essays tend to be well-written and often have highly engaging content.

Personal essays have certain advantages. They are usually written strongly in the student's own voice, which brings a willingness to take a position that can be hard to generate when dealing with purely historical questions. In addition, John Bean has indicated that students are better able to correct their own errors when they are dealing with ideas over which they have greater confidence, and when they are able in a sense to hear what they are writing.<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 2009 in my writing intensive modern American history survey at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), I had success in assigning a personal essay as a response to Ben Hamper's *Rivethed: Tales from the Assembly Line*. I not only found that this approach produced more engaging, analytic essays, but I also was surprised

to learn something about labor history, which is the extent to which Fordist methods of mass production have penetrated areas of work far removed from the assembly line.

At BMCC, “writing intensive” courses require students to complete ten to twelve pages of formal graded writing. This requirement can be met with several short papers or a longer paper broken up into stages, and students must have the opportunity to revise their writing so that they can benefit from feedback from the professor. The course must also incorporate informal, ungraded writing, and classes are limited to twenty-five students.

*Rivthead* is an amusing, informally written memoir of a General Motors (GM) assembly line worker in the late 1970s and 1980s. Hamper spends much of the text describing his efforts to avoid work and cope with the monotony of the assembly line. For example, he would “double-up” with a co-worker so that while one did both jobs, the other was free to roam about the plant or read.<sup>2</sup> He also came up with diversions, such as “rivet hockey,” which consisted of kicking rivets at co-workers’ shins, and “dumpster ball,” which involved kicking a cardboard box high enough to clear a large trash bin.<sup>3</sup> Hamper does very little to change this situation. Although he labored during a period of generous union-negotiated contracts, the union is something of a far-off presence, people around a conference table rather than workers on the shop floor engaged in any sort of day-to-day struggle.<sup>4</sup>

When I first gave the assignment in the fall of 2008, I approached it from a labor history perspective. We had studied the loss of skilled workers’ control over the pace and methods of production due to the rise of scientific management in the nineteenth century and the introduction of Fordist mass production in the twentieth century. We also studied the achievement of workers’ participation in determining the conditions of their own labor during World War I and the New Deal through hard-fought struggles over unionization and union recognition. Thinking of deindustrialization and a routinized collective bargaining process, I asked why Hamper did not turn to union activity or other forms of labor protest to try to improve his workplace.

Students were uninterested in this question, and did not seem to understand it. Although they enjoyed reading the book, they focused on Hamper’s unsuccessful efforts to avoid the path of his father, also a GM worker, and could not perceive what I was driving at with my question about union decline and the loss of workers’ control. Even one of my strongest students was unable to answer this question clearly, even with the benefit of my feedback on her first draft. A perceptive army veteran taking the course let me know that this was a much harder question than that on the other two papers.

At this point, I remembered a syllabus I had seen at Queens College, following a year spent as a writing fellow in their Writing Across the Curriculum program from 2005 to 2006. A professor there teaching an immigration history course satisfied the writing intensive requirement of breaking the paper into stages by asking the students to write two papers, one describing their own immigration narrative, and a second placing this recollection in historical context.<sup>5</sup> At the time, this assignment had prompted me to rethink the personal essay as something that could be harnessed to produce a more analytic final product. I had filed this knowledge away until I confronted my students' halting responses to my initial assignment of *Rivethead*. If students were asked to reflect on their personal experience, they might also discuss their reactions to the text, which would bring an analytical voice to the project.

The following semester, I asked students a different question. Did they sympathize with Hamper's efforts to avoid work, and did they ever have a personal experience that helped them relate to his situation? I thought this was an easier question for students to approach with a clear point of view, and that bringing in their own experience might help them get their own voice going. On the other hand, I was concerned that many students would try to blame GM's impending bankruptcy on Hamper.

To my surprise, most of the students sympathized with Hamper. One student, who was from Jamaica, considered Hamper to have squandered his opportunities.<sup>6</sup> But most found that his perspective resonated with their own, even though only one had worked in a factory. This student, who was from Egypt, described taking a job in a chocolate biscuit factory, where he was permitted to eat as many broken biscuits as he wanted. He quit after five days, and "for the following two months" could not "look at any chocolate or biscuit products."<sup>7</sup> But most worked in areas very different from an auto plant. One student was working as a mover. He said that at first the work was "very interesting," but eventually, it took on "a similar pattern that we work by, we take out all the boxes, were [sic] we simulate the assembly line by dividing between floors, after that we wrap up all the furniture and once we get to the other location we do the same thing just in the reverse order."<sup>8</sup> This struck me as an interesting point—the comparison not only of his experience of monotony to Hamper's, but of his work process to the assembly line.

A third student compared his experience at Dunkin Donuts to Hamper's. While Hamper said people who worked at General Motors were identifiable by the "expression on their face," the student said "you could notice a Dunkin Donuts employee by the smell of sugar and coffee embedded in their clothes." One important difference he noted was that while Hamper could often move about freely, this student could not leave his "work sta-

tion” at any of the jobs he had held without permission.<sup>9</sup> This contrast surprised me—I had not noticed the supervision at Dunkin Donuts the many times I had been there and did not appreciate how such jobs could in some respects be just as intense as assembly line labor.

Finally, students compared the games that Hamper came up with to their own ruses to cope with monotony on their jobs. While Hamper played rivet hockey, a student working in the stacks at the New York Public Library said that he and his co-workers used to play “book tag,” which was “exactly how it sounds.” He described this as “childish,” although I was more concerned about the condition of some of the very fragile books and magazines in the NYPL’s collection.<sup>10</sup>

All in all, these students’ reflections seemed to be fruitful comparisons between their own experiences on the job and Hamper’s. I was struck by the extent to which students had interesting things to say and analytic comparisons to draw. To get the students to be willing to speak in their own voice, it was helpful to let them write about something they knew well.

This assignment also had an important side benefit, which is that I learned something about my students’ working lives. I had not thought about the extent to which seemingly complex jobs such as packing up the contents of a house could be broken down into repetitive tasks resembling assembly line work. Nor had I thought that something as seemingly benign as work in a public library could feel like work in a factory.

I would recommend a couple of guidelines, however, when using the personal essay. First, the assignment should be specific, in that it asks the students to write about a particular aspect of their lives. This helps ensure that they are writing something new for the assignment at hand rather than recycling something they may have submitted in the past. Second, I would try to make the reflection germane to the assignment or assigned source material. Focusing on the workplace succeeded in this case because the majority of students at BMCC work, and many of them work full time. With these caveats in mind, I would say that a personal reflection is a good way to engage students in historical thinking and to enable them to appreciate the perspective of people living in a different time.

## Notes

1. John C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 62-64.
2. Ben Hamper, *Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 35-40.
3. *Ibid.*, 150-152.
4. See *ibid.*, 167 for an encounter with union representatives.
5. Peter Conolly-Smith, "History 276W: Immigration and Ethnicity in America/Conolly-Smith (F06)," *Writing Across the Curriculum*, Queens College, <<http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/Writing/wsyllabi.htm>>.
6. "Wasted Privileged [sic]" (student paper, Department of Social Science, Borough of Manhattan Community College, 2009), 3. Author names have been omitted. All student papers are in the private collection of the author.
7. "Rewrite Paper" (student paper, Department of Social Science, Borough of Manhattan Community College, 2009), 1.
8. "Coping with the Line" (student paper, Department of Social Science, Borough of Manhattan Community College, 2009), 4.
9. "Final Response Paper" (student paper, Department of Social Science, Borough of Manhattan Community College, 2009), 2.
10. "Response to *Rivethead*" (student paper, Department of Social Science, Borough of Manhattan Community College, 2009), 3.



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