

HUNTER COLLEGE READING/WRITING CENTER  
**WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: The CPE Examination**  
Sample Reading 1

“Engagement and Detachment: Getting Involved”

Philip Slater

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People in the United States have a compulsive tendency to avoid confronting chronic social problems. This tendency often comes as a surprise to foreigners, who think of Americans as pragmatic and down-to-earth. But trying to solve a long-range social problem with a short-run solution—a down-to-earth result, surely—can hardly be considered practical when it aggravates the problem, as it almost always does. American pragmatism is deeply irrational in this respect, and in our hearts we've always known it. One of the favorite themes of American cartoonists is the man who paints himself into a corner, saws off the limb he's sitting on, or runs out of space on the sign he's printing. The scientist of horror films, whose experiments lead to disastrously unforeseen consequences, is a more nervous version of this same awareness that the most future-oriented nation in the world shows a deep incapacity to plan ahead. We are, as a people, perturbed by our inability to anticipate the consequences of our acts, but we still wait optimistically for some magic telegram, informing us that the tangled skein of misery and self—deception into which we have woven ourselves has vanished in the night. Each month popular magazines regale their readers with such telegrams: announcing that our transportation crisis will be solved by a bigger plane or a wider road, poverty with a law, urban violence with a new weapon, racism with a goodwill gesture. Foreigners are surprised when Americans exhibit this kind of naivete and/or cynicism about social problems—they don't realize that no matter what realism we may display in technical areas, our approach to social issues inevitably falls back on a cinematic tradition in which social problems are resolved by a gesture.

When a social problem persists (as they always do), those who call attention to its continued presence are accused of "going too far" and "causing the pendulum to swing the other way." We can make war on poverty but shrink from the extensive changes required to end it. Once a law is passed, a top commission set up, a study made, a report written, the problem is expected to have been "wiped out" or "mopped up." The terminological similarity between military actions abroad and "crash programs" at home reveals a psychological one. Our approach to transportation problems has had the

effect of making it easier and easier to travel to more and more places that have become less and less worth driving to. Asking us to consider the manifold consequences of chopping down a forest, draining a swamp, spraying a field with poison, making it easier to drive into an already crowded city, or selling deadly weapons to everyone who wants them arouses in us the same impatience as a chess problem would in a hyperactive six-year-old.

The avoiding tendency lies at the very root of American character. This nation was settled and continually repopulated by people who were not personally successful in confronting the social conditions in their mother country, but fled in the hope of a better life. By a kind of natural selection, America was disproportionately populated with a certain kind of person.

In the past we've always stressed the positive side of this selection, implying that America thereby found itself blessed with an unusual number of energetic, mobile, ambitious, daring, and optimistic persons. Now there's no reason to deny that there were differences between those who chose to come and those who chose to stay, nor that these differences must have reproduced themselves in social institutions. But very little attention has been paid to the negative side of the selection. If we gained the energetic and daring, we also gained the lion's share of the rootless, the unscrupulous, those who valued money over relationships, and those who put self-aggrandizement ahead of love and loyalty. And most of all, we gained an undue proportion of persons who, when faced with a difficult situation, tended to chuck the whole thing and flee to a new environment. Escaping, evading, and avoiding are responses which lie at the base of much that is peculiarly American—the suburb, the automobile, the self-service store, and so on.

These responses also contribute to the appalling discrepancy between our wealth and our treatment of those who cannot adequately care for themselves. In a cooperative, stable society, aged, infirm, or psychotic persons can be absorbed by the local community, which knows and understands them. They present a familiar difficulty that can be confronted daily and directly. This situation cannot be reproduced in our society today—the same burden must be carried by a small, isolated, mobile family unit that is not really equipped for it.

But if we are forced to incarcerate those who can't function independently in our society, we ought at least to know what we're doing when we do it. The institutions we provide for those who cannot care for themselves are human garbage heaps—they both result from and reinforce our tendency to avoid confronting social and interpersonal problems. They make life "easier" for the rest of society, just like the automobile. And just as we find ourselves devising ridiculous exercises to counteract the harmful effects of our dependence upon the automobile, so the "ease" of our social technology makes us bored, flabby, and insensitive, and our lives empty and mechanical.