

Writing Assignments: Where Writing Begins

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To begin to write is to "know" what at the outset cannot be known except by inventing it, exactly, intentionally, autodidactically.

Edward Said,
Beginnings

I want to use this occasion¹ to work on the paradox at the center of this passage from Beginnings: to begin to write is to "know" what cannot be known. It has become commonplace for English teachers to talk of writing as a "mode of learning," or of writing as "discovery." And it has become common to represent the writer's struggle as a struggle for realization: "How can I know what I mean until I see what I've said?" This representation of writing is conventionally in service of a pedagogy whose primary aim is to enable students to work out something that is inside them: insight, vision, ideas, connections, wisdom.

If, however, we take knowledge to be something that is outside the writer, something inscribed in a discourse--the commonplaces, the texts, the gestures and jargon, the interpretive schemes--of a group from which the writer is excluded, then the paradox must be read differently. To discover or to learn, the student must, by writing, become like us--English teachers, adults, intellectuals, academics. He must become someone he is not. He must know what we know, talk like we talk; he must locate himself convincingly in a language that is not his own. He must invent the university when he sits down to write.

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This is what I take Burke to be talking about when he talks about persuasion as "identification:"

The individual person, striving to form himself in accordance with the communicative norms that match the cooperative ways of his society, is, then, concerned with the rhetoric of identification. To act upon himself persuasively, he must variously resort to images and ideas that are formative. Education ("indoctrination") exerts such pressure upon him from without; he completes the process from within (Burke, p.39).

The struggle of the student writer is not the struggle to bring out that which is within; it is the struggle to carry out those ritual activities that grant one entrance into a closed society. Or, as Foucault would have it, "The discourse of struggle does not oppose what is unconscious, it opposes what is secret."

Teachers as priests of mystery, teaching as indoctrination, writing as identification--these are not popular definitions. They do, however, provide a way of talking about the business of assigning writing to students. For me it is a necessary way of talking. Let me work this out by telling some stories.

When I was first a Director of Composition, and before I was tenured (this is to add spice to the story), a bunch of students came into my office to register a complaint about one of their teachers, a senior colleague of mine, a full professor and a distinguished scholar. This was about the tenth week of classes. It seemed that he had assigned one paper in the first week of the term but hadn't assigned any writing since. His students, rather, had been listening to lectures on the paragraph and the sentence,

on style and organization, and they had, as well, been given the task of copying out longhand essays by Lamb, Macaulay, Ruskin and Carlyle. The students were wondering how in the world he was ever going to grade them, since he seemed to be collecting such unusual artifacts to judge.

I mustered up my courage and went to visit this professor, told him of the complaints, and mentioned as gently as I could that the rest of us were assigning one--and in some cases two--papers a week. Here is his response: "I assigned a paper early in the term and they wrote miserably. If I assign more writing, they'll only make more mistakes." When I asked whether this meant, then, that the best writing course is the one in which students never wrote, where potential never had to be compromised by execution, he said, "No. When they are ready to write, I'll set them to writing again."

Let me call this the Big Bang theory of writing instruction. Students are given instruction in writing as a subject--sometimes through lectures, sometimes through textbooks, sometimes through classroom analyses of prose models--and then, when they are ready, they write. The assignment, then serves as a test. It is the students' opportunity to show that they have mastered the subject. There are Little Bang versions of this available everywhere: in most textbooks, for example, where writing is broken up into sub-skills--description, narration, exposition, argumentation.

Now if writing is conceived of as a technique--as a means for communicating what is known and not as a way of knowing itself--and if the techniques being taught are simple enough--the 5 sentence paragraph, ABAB comparisons--, then it is not unreasonable to suppose that students can pass the weekly test. If, however, the students are also to learn to write like Lamb or Macaulay (to represent themselves within those peculiar gestures and patterns--and I am not willing to quickly condemn the copying out of essays in that course), then that copying will have to be accompanied by assigned writing of

quite another kind. The ability to write like Macaulay, in other words, will not come in a big bang. The indoctrination will have to be "completed," in Burke's terms, by acts of writing that complete the shaping of a writer. "If he does not somehow act to tell himself (as his own audience) what the various brands of rhetoricians have told him, his persuasion is not complete" (Burke, p.39).

Perhaps this leads to our first principle of assignment making. If assignments invite students to enter into a discourse which is not their own, and if their representations will only approximate that discourse (if they don't come in a big bang), then assignments must lead students through successive approximations. The movement through successive approximations is a cycle of expectation and disappointment. There is no clear-cut developmental sequence here; students do not move easily from one level of mastery to the next. This is what it means to be going after secrets. As Kermode says,

Hot for secrets, our only conversation may be with guardians who know less and see less than we can; and our sole hope and pleasure is in the perception of a momentary radiance, before the door of disappointment is finally shut on us (Kermode, p. 145).

Here is my second story. A teacher at a school I recently visited gave what I thought was a wonderful assignment--and she gave it knowing that her students, at least most of them, would have to write their papers over again, perhaps several times, since in many ways it was an 'impossible assignment. She asked students to read through the journals they had been keeping over the semester and to write about what they had learned about themselves from reading the journal. What I admired in this assignment, and what makes it such a difficult assignment, is that students were asked to write about what they had learned by reading the journal and not what they learned by writing in the journal. This is a nice stroke, since it defines the journal as a text and not an experience, and it defines the person writing as a

composite of several people and not as a moment of feeling or thought. The assignment defines the student as, simultaneously, a textual presence--the "I" in a passage dated September 3rd and the "I" in a passage dated October 5th--and as an interpreter of texts, someone who defines patterns and imposes order, form, on previous acts of ordering. Who is to say quickly what that person might learn? The subject of this assignment, then is language and language using. Students are not invited to believe that a subject can be something else--experience, truth, data--something that exists outside language, something language can record. This is often the trap of journal writing; students are led to believe that the journal is a true record of true feelings--a rare occasion for self-expression. As Bruner says (and I've taken this passage from a fine article by Ken Dowst describing the kind of composition course that depends most heavily on carefully crafted and carefully conceived assignments):

A student does not respond to a world that exists for direct touching. Nor is he locked in a prison of subjectivity. Rather, he represents the world to himself and acts in behalf of or in reaction to his representations.... A change in one's conception of the world involves not simply a change in what one encounters but also in how one translates it (Dowst, p.68).

A change in one's conception of the world by means of a change in how one translates it--perhaps here we have the beginnings of a second principle for assignment-making. We shouldn't provide a subject only; we should provide the occasion for translation. To put it more simply, the journal assignment undercuts students' impulses to write about journal writing without writing about the writing in the journal. It allows them to translate (or to "read") those moments of "feeling" as moments of artifice or representation, as evidence of the roles defined as a writer shaped experience, history, the "stuff" of his or her life.

My next story comes again from my own school. A group of us were asked to put together an experimental course, not just a reading course or a writing course, but a course, as we later said, to introduce students to the language and methods of university study. We decided that this should be a course in which students didn't learn a subject--something already prepared by one of the traditional academic disciplines--but it should be a course in which students invented a subject by inventing a discipline, one with its own specialized vocabulary and its own peculiar interpretive schemes.

Now this course would need a nominal subject--a subject that would provide the occasion for a discourse. And the subject we chose was "Growth and Change in Adolescence." It seemed to provide, in Freire's terms, a "generative" theme, one that students could write about with care and energy. The first assignment, then, had to be an impossible one. Students could write about adolescence, but not as we would write about it. They would use the language, and the commonplaces, immediately available to them, but these would not be the language or commonplaces of a small, professional, closed, interpretive community. The sequence of assignments would have them writing about the same subject over and over again, with each act of writing complicating and qualifying the previous act of writing, each paper drawing on the language developed by the group. The papers were regularly duplicated and used as the basis of class discussion. The instructors would outline, highlight and push in class discussion; they would not provide theories or terms of their own. The last assignment in the course, then, would be a record of this new discipline--the study of the process of change in adolescence developed by the group.

The assignments went something like this. There was a group of assignments that asked students to develop a theory on the basis of their own experience.

Think of a time in the last 2 or 3 years when something significant happened to you, something that caused you to change or to change your

mind. Then do what you can to help the rest of us understand the process of change.

Think of another time.... What now can you say to help us understand the process of change?

Think of a time when, by all popular expectation, you went through an experience that should have caused you to change, but it didn't. What now...?

Think of a time when you decided to make a change in yourself. What happened? What now...?

Students began to develop a process of interpretation, one that dealt more with the dynamics of change (family, school, friends, enemies, goals, self-images) than with the mechanism of change. And they developed a shared set of terms: the Jones dilemma (competition with an older, successful brother); the Smith syndrome (anger directed at a parent who had left home); the Kowalski problem (wanting to be good but wanting, as well, to be cool).

These papers served as the basis for a longer paper, one we called, "A Section of your Autobiography," dealing with the sorts of changes the students went through in the previous three years. We took the class's autobiographies to central printing, had them bound, and sold them back to the class as a text. They became, then, "case studies." And we led students through a series of papers that asked them to read the autobiographies, locate patterns of themes and experiences, invent names for those patterns and develop theories to account for them.

The final set of assignments directed the students to rework those papers in the context of three standard, academic accounts of adolescence--one by a psychologist, one by a sociologist, and one by an anthropologist.

This became an enormously popular and successful course. In fact, when my college began its own version of "writing across the curriculum," it was offered as a model for courses in departments other than the English department. One psy-

chologist was quite interested until he realized, as he said,

You know, the problem is, that at the end of the course they're likely to get it all wrong. After all--what about Piaget and Erikson. They're not going to get that stuff on their own.

Of course not, that's the point. They can only approximate the conventional methods of academic psychologists, only pretend to be psychologists or sociologists or anthropologists, and they will not get the canonical interpretations preserved by the disciplines. But they will learn something about what it means to study a subject, to carry out a project. And they will begin to learn what a subject is--how it is constituted, how it is defended, how it finds its examples and champions, how it changes and preserves itself. There is, then, a way of studying psychology by learning to report on textbook accounts or class-room lectures on the works of psychologists. But there is also a way of learning psychology by learning to write and, thereby, learning to compose the world as a psychologist. In his four years of college education, a student gets plenty of the former but precious little of the latter. He writes many reports but carries out few projects. And this leads me to my next principle of assignment making. Individual assignments should be part of a larger, group project. I'll have more to say in defense of this later in my talk.

My last story comes from Tolstoy; although to be honest, it came to me from Ann Berthoff and is available in her wise and eloquent book, The Making of Meaning (Berthoff, pp.61-147). Tolstoy set out to teach the children of his newly emancipated serfs to read and write. He began, he said, by asking his students to write about what seemed easiest--the most simple and general subject.

In the first class we tried compositions on given themes. The first themes that must have naturally occurred to us were descriptions of simple objects, such as grain, the house, the wood, and so forth; but, to our great surprise, these demands on our students almost made them

weep, and in spite of the aid afforded them by the teacher, who divided the description of its growth, its change into bread, its use, they emphatically refused to write upon such themes, or, if they did write, they made the most incomprehensible and senseless mistakes in orthography, in the language and in the meaning.

Now Tolstoy was not a Big Banger. He tried again; in fact, he tried, as he says, different assignments. "I gave them, according to their inclinations, exact, artistic, touching, funny, epic themes,--and nothing worked."

By chance, however, he hit upon a method (and "method" is his term) that did. He happened one day to be reading proverbs ("a favorite occupation") and carried the book with him to school. "Well," he said to his students, "write something on a proverb." The best students pricked up their ears. "What do you mean by on a proverb? What it is. Tell us!" the questions ran. Tolstoy goes on:

I happened to open to the proverb: "He feeds with the spoon, and pricks the eye with the handle." "Now imagine," I said, "that a peasant has taken a beggar to his house, and then begins to rebuke him for the good he has done him, and you will get that 'He feeds with the spoon, and pricks the eye with the handle.'"

But how are you going to write it up?" said Fedka and all the rest who had pricked up their ears. They retreated, having convinced themselves that this matter was above their strength, and betook themselves to the work which they had begun. "Write it yourself," one of them said to me. Everyone was busy with his work; I took a pen and inkstand, and began to write. "Well," said I, "who will write it best? I am with you."

Tolstoy began to write the story to accompany the proverb and wrote a page. He says, and you'll now begin to see the point this story, the story of this assignment, makes for Tolstoy:

Every unbiased man, who has artistic sense and feels with the people,

will, upon reading the first page, written by me, and the following pages of the story, written by the pupils themselves, separate this page from the rest as he will take a fly out of the milk: it is so false, so artificial and written in such bad language. I must remark that in the original form it was even more monstrous, since much has been corrected, thanks to the indications of the pupils.

The sight of the teacher writing caused a flurry in the classroom. One student said, "Write, write or I'll give it to you!" Others crowded around his chair and read over his shoulder. The commotion was such that Tolstoy stopped and read his first page to them. They did not like it. Nobody praised it. In defense of himself, Tolstoy began to explain the "plan" of what was to follow. They butted in, "No, no, that won't do," he made corrections, and they began helping him out. All, Tolstoy says,

were exceedingly interested. It was evidently new and absorbing to be in on the process of creation, to take part in it. Their judgments were all, for the most part, of the same kind, and they were just, both as to the structure of the story and to the details and characterizations of the persons. Nearly all of them took part in the composition....

Two, however, stayed on and worked late into the night, annoyed when Tolstoy wanted a break. One of those who remained asked, "Are we going to print it?" When Tolstoy said yes, he replied, "Then we shall have to print it: Work by Makarov, Morozov, and Tolstoy."

There are many ways of reading this story. It could be said that Tolstoy was lucky enough to find the right assignment: a theme on a proverb. It's as though you could go to the exercise exchange and find the assignment whose subject is just right for your students--sports for the athletes, drugs for the heads, movies for the rest, proverbs for the children of Russian peasants. I

don't choose to read the story this way. While I believe it is important for teachers to consider carefully the subjects they present to students, and while I believe students write best about subjects that interest them--subjects they believe in, subjects they know something about, subjects they believe there is reason to write about and for which they can imagine an occasion for writing (witness Booth's story about his frustrated graduate student in "The Rhetorical Stance"), the very notion of motive is misunderstood if a motive is taken to reside in a subject. The question, rather, is one of how students can be taught to imagine a subject as a subject, not as a thing they like or don't like, but as a discourse, as a set of conventional, available utterances within which they can locate utterances of their own. The question is not one of which subject will work, but of how students can learn to work on a subject and of why such work is worth the effort.

Tolstoy's students didn't leap to the proverb assignment; they told him to write the theme, convinced the subject was "beyond their strength," and went back to their own work. Their first question, you remember, to Tolstoy's assignment, "write something on a proverb," was, "What do you mean 'on a proverb'? What is it? Tell us?" Tolstoy read them a proverb, but they never started writing until he answered the first question and showed them what it meant to write on a proverb. He did this by writing with them, by showing them not a subject, but the subject as a potential discourse, a story about a beggar and a peasant who abuses him while offering charity. It was at that point that the students had a subject, and the subject was not the story and not the proverb, but the act of amplification. A subject is not a thing but an action--thinking, describing, analyzing, elaborating, naming. All subjects, and this is what I take to be the burden of the post-structuralists, are as Richards says, "characteristic uses of language." Tolstoy, then, gave his students not just a language but a discourse, a conventional procedure for elaborating a subject.

How else might we read the story of Tolstoy and the proverb? It could be read as support of the notion that teachers should write papers along with their students. I'm not very keen on this, either as a reading or a practice. Writing teachers should be writers, this I believe deeply. But they should be too busy with their own projects, and with the exacting task of writing assignments and writing to students about their writing, to have time for weekly papers in concert with a class. Besides, the presence of Tolstoy writing in the classroom had only shock value. The students became writers only when they participated in his writing. They began to learn when they began assisting him in a project he had begun, and a project can be begun by the text of a well-crafted and self-conscious assignment, one that presents not just a subject but a way of imagining a subject as a subject, a discourse one can enter, and not as a thing that carries with it experiences or ideas that can be communicated.

One could read the story as evidence that students should begin with narrative, with story-telling, since this draws upon patterns of organization closest to the pattern of experience. I don't believe that this is a true statement about narrative, and the evidence Tolstoy provides shows the children choosing detail and projecting narrative as an interpretation of a concept (another interpretation) coded in the proverb.

Tolstoy does argue, however, for a form of "natural" expression that is only impeded or thwarted by education. Here is his interpretation of the event:

It is impossible and absurd to teach and educate a child, for the simple reason that the child stands nearer than I do, than any grown man does, to that ideal of harmony, truth, beauty, and goodness, to which I, in my pride, wish to raise him. The consciousness of this ideal is more powerful in him than in me. All he needs of one is the material (and we have to wonder what "material" means in this sentence), in order to de-

velop harmoniously. The moment I gave him full liberty and stopped teaching him, he wrote a poetical production, the like of which cannot be found in Russian literature. Therefore, it is my conviction that we cannot teach children in general, and peasant children in particular, to write and compose. All that we can do is to teach them how to go about writing.

We cannot teach children to compose; all we can do is to teach them how to go about writing. This is another paradox, and I'd like to see what I can do to make sense out of it.

Now in working on the Tolstoy Paradox, I do not choose to read these passages as celebrations of natural innocence, where a good assignment replaces "teacher-sponsored writing, with "student-sponsored" writing, freeing a student from the fetters of an oppressive culture.

Tolstoy's own accounts of his "method" show him getting in his students' way more than his narrative would lead one to believe. The prime consideration, he says, in designing a sequence of "themes" should not be length or content but "the working out of the matter." And this, the working out of the matter, was the occasion for teaching.

At first I chose from the ideas and images that presented themselves to them such as I considered best, and retained them, and pointed out the place, and consulted with what had already been written, keeping them from repetitions, and myself wrote, leaving to them only the clothing of the images and ideas in words; then I allowed them to make their own choice, and later to consult that which had been written down, until, at last, ...they took the whole matter into their own hands (Tolstoy, p.224).

When Tolstoy talks about choosing, selecting, preserving and remembering, he is not talking about "natural" acts but a system that is imposed. He, and the text

he has in mind, allow for certain choices. The procedure must be learned.

Derrida has taught us that the Rousseauesque notions of a "natural" language are all symptoms of a longing for a perfect relation between the word and the thing it is meant to signify for a language that gives us direct access to the truth, without the mediation of the stuff and baggage of a culture, for a form of understanding that represents data raw and not cooked, for a mode of composition in which thinking and writing do not interfere with each other. What comes before speech, he argues, is writing, that conventional system, discourse, that inscribes us as we inscribe it. There is, then, no natural or pure language because the language we use always precedes us, belongs to others, and it, and not the writer, determines what is written. The writer does not write but is rather written, composed by systems he did not invent and he cannot escape. Our language is derived, "stolen," never original. The celebration of innocence, Derrida argues, is not a denial of teaching but a denial of writing.

But Tolstoy, in his rejection of education, does not reject writing, even though he feels the burden of the role of the teacher. In fact, in a telling passage, he says that after the episode with the proverb he felt not just joy, but dread--

Dread, because this art made new demands, a whole new world of desires, which stood in no relation to the surroundings of these pupils, as I thought first.

This is the Tolstoy that gives his student "material." All they need of me, he says, is material--not pencils and paper, not subjects, but the material (as in fabric) that is woven with the habits, discriminations, preconceptions--the "stuff" of his material, that is, textual, culture. It is exclusive. It privileges some statements at the expense of others. It is driven by a law of exclusion--this then fits, that, "the world of his pupils," does not. At one point, one

child in a "fatigued, calmly serious and habitual" voice comments on his text. Tolstoy says, "The chief quality of any art, the feeling of limit, was developed in him to an extraordinary degree. He writhed at the suggestion of any superfluous feature, made by some one of the boys."

Let me put my cards on the table, and explain why I want to read Tolstoy this way. I think a good assignment teaches by interfering. It interferes with a student and his writing, but more of this later.

Tolstoy's "method"--the method that does not teach composing but how to go about writing--could be seen to be in service of what we now comfortably call the "Process" approach to composition instruction. If the act of composing is beyond a teacher's art, it is a natural or mysterious facility, then a teacher can at least attend to the behavior of composing--to the business of prewriting, revising, and editing. This is how I take the pedagogies of the "new rhetoric." The tagmemics, the pentads, the classroom heuristics--all these are devices that precede writing. They are not part of a project. The nine-fold grid may give a new perspective on, say a tree (and the metaphor of vision is telling) but it does not give a language. What happens to the student when he begins to write, when he locates himself in a discourse, is that he is caught up in all those available phrases about nature, and ecology and the pastoral world that turn his "vision" into an occasion for cliché.

Don't get me wrong. Writing is a behavior and a good set of assignments teaches a student to understand this--to experiment with varieties of planning activities, to take time with his writing, to revise (often for the first time) by reworking and not just recopying a text, and to edit, to make corrections. I'll confess, however, that I think most of the attention to pre-writing is a waste of time, unless pre-writing is, in fact, the first act of writing--in Tolstoy's terms--the first "working art of the matter." Most pre-writing activities, how-

ever, treat "ideas" as though they existed independently of language, of the sentences that enact them. And, in my experience, students treat these exercises the way they used to treat outlining; they either do them after they have written the paper, or they do them and then go about writing the paper the same damn way they have always written--starting at the top, working to the bottom and then handing it in for a grade.

Let me go back to Ann Berthoff. Here is what she says about Tolstoy and his teaching:

Nothing is needed more urgently in the current reassessment of what we think we have been doing in teaching composition than a critical inquiry into this concept of the simultaneity of thinking and writing, of the role of consciousness in composing. Tolstoy's description here is a useful point of departure for that inquiry because it reminds us that composing is both creative and critical and that it is an act of mind; it doesn't just happen; it is conscious (Berthoff, p.89).

This consciousness is critical consciousness, not consciousness as it is represented by classroom heuristics. It is rooted in an act of reading. She says, elsewhere in her book, that "writing can't teach writing unless it is understood as a nonlinear, dialectical process in which the writer continually circles back, reviewing and rewriting: certainly the way to learn to do that is to practice doing just that" (Berthoff, p.3). The key words here are "reviewing" and "dialectical," and they are difficult words to understand. Let me try to put them into the context of assignment making.

I'm concerned now with that version of "thinking" which is textual, not mental, since it involves reading and interpretation ("reviewing") and a use of language in service of dialectic. Here's an assignment: It was given to me by a teacher at a school I visited as a consultant.

Pick a poem that you like. Discuss why you like it by analyzing its features rather than defending your response. Think before you write so that you produce a coherent and well-organized essay.

This is the sort of assignment that most likely will prove the law of reciprocity--what you ask for is what you'll get. It's poorly written and demonstrates, more than anything else, a teacher's boredom and inattention, and it would be the exceptional student who would make anything of it other than the occasion for poor writing and inattention. There is no indication of how or why the fact that one likes a poem is dependent on an "analysis of its features." Nor is there any clue as to what it means to "discuss" while at the same time not "defending a response." The final sentence, "Think before you write so that you produce a coherent and well organized essay," is a not-quite-so-polite way of saying, "Please do a decent job of this" and it finesses the whole question of how "thinking before writing" (making an outline? getting one's thoughts together?) leads to a "coherent, well organized essay." There is, however, a rhetoric at work here--the rhetoric of the controlling idea in service of what seems to be an act of new criticism--but the demonstration that Tolstoy provided, the way he assisted students in a project he had begun--and it was his project, belonging to his culture--this assistance is missing. The word "analyze," for instance, exists as an invocation, a magic word calling up powers to possess the student. It does not belong to the vocabulary shared between teachers and students; it does not, in fact, belong to the vocabulary shared between teachers in different academic departments. It presumes to tell students to do what they cannot know how to do--and that is to carry out an act of analysis as it is represented by the conventions of the discourse of a certain form of literary criticism.

Our assignments are often studded with such words--think, analyze, define, describe, argue. These words, however, are located in a very specialized discourse.

Analysis, for example, is a very different activity--its textual forms, that is, vary greatly--in an English course, a history course, a sociology course or a chemistry course. When we use such words, we are asking students to invent our disciplines, to take on the burden of the mindset of our peculiar pocket of the academic community. This is not a bad thing to do, even though it is cause for dread as well as joy. It is why, for me, a good set of assignments leads a class to invent a discipline, a set of specialized terms (a jargon) and a subject with its own privileged materials and interpretative scheme.

Because writing--or writing that is not report or debate--is the invention of such a project, writing is also, as we are fond of saying, a mode of learning, where learning is a matter of learning to use the specialized vocabulary and interpretative schemes of the various disciplines. To learn sociology--and to learn it as an activity, as something other than a set of names and canonical interpretations--is to learn to write like a sociologist, for better or for worse. Students cannot do this, however, without assistance, since the conventions that govern a rhetoric do not "naturally" belong to the mind, the heart, reason, or the soul. Reason, in fact, is not an operative term if one begins with a conception of rhetoric. It is metaphor, a way of authorizing one discourse over another, but it is not a descriptive term.

Here is a sequence of assignments that offers more by way of assistance in the "working out of the matter." It comes from a course in 19th century fiction.

Bleak House

I. In order to prepare a paper on the narrative in Bleak House, I'd like you to do the following:

- 1) Locate two passages that, as you read them, best characterized the voice and perspective of Esther Summerson as she tells the story. Write them out.
- 2) Locate two passages that, as you read them, best characterize the voice and perspective of the other, the unnamed narrator. Write them

out. Working primarily from one passage for each narrator, write a paper that compares the way they see the world of Bleak House and the way they tell a story. Be sure to look at sentences as well as sentiments; that is, pay attention to language each uses to locate a perspective and a world.

Then, when you've done this, go on to speculate about how the presence of two narrators controls your reading of the story.

II. I'd like you to look, now, at the first and last chapters. Who gets the first word and who gets the last word and the difference it makes. What difference does it make, that is, to you and your attempt to make sense out of the novel?

III. Here is a passage from an essay by J. Hillas Miller. In it, he offers one account for the effect on a reader of the presence of the two narrators. I'd like you to write a paper that talks about the way his reading is different from yours, and about what difference the difference makes to you. Be sure, again, to talk about sentences as well as sentiments. What, for example, does Miller notice that you didn't? And what did you notice that he leaves out? What special terms does he use that you don't. What difference do they make?

IV. On the basis of these 3 papers, write an essay to help us better understand narrative technique in Bleak House. Don't feel you have to settle the question once and for all. Remember, that is, that the rest of us are working on this problem too, and that we're looking for your help. We're not beginners and we have a lot invested in our own projects.

Often any such assistance is at odds with the peculiar rhetoric of the composition class, with its obsessive concern for the thesis, the controlling idea. When, for example, we ask students to write about texts, the tyranny of the thesis often invalidates the very act of analysis we hope to invoke. Hence, in assignment after assignment, we find students asked to reduce a novel, a poem or their own experience into a single sentence, and then to use the act of writing in order to defend or "support" that single sentence. Writing is used to close a subject down rather than to open it up, to put an end to discourse rather than to open up a project. This, I think, is the

rhetoric that is "natural" to our students. If English teachers can have any effect on students' writing, it should be to counter this tendency. To interfere with it.

The term "interference" comes to me from Kenneth Burke, whose writing I admire for the way it enacts a constant dissatisfaction with the thesis. Burke's rhetoric is in service of a form of knowledge that is not equated with certainty. His sense of a dialectical use of language is a use of language that allows the writer not only to translate "reality"--the subject that is only a thing to be written about--but also to transcend the conventional and often oppressive gestures built into the history of our language, to transcend, then, the inevitable reduction caused by writing. Burke says

We would only say that, over and above all, there is implicit in language itself, the act of persuasion (that domination or closing down of a subject); and implicit in the perpetuating of persuasion, there is the need for interference. For persuasion that succeeds, dies.

Burke, then, brings me to my last principle of assignment making. A good set of assignments assists students toward a subject by interfering with their immediate procedures for dominating a subject by reducing it to a closed set. Edward Said, whose words stood at the beginning of this talk, said that writing requires the writer to maintain an "obligation" to "practical reality" and a "sympathetic imagination" in equally strong parts. By obligation, he means

the precision with which the concrete circumstances of any undertaking oblige the mind to take them into account--the obligation not just passively to continue, but the obligation to begin by learning, first, that there is no schematic method that makes all things simple, then second, whatever with reference to one's circumstances is necessary in order to begin, given one's field of study.

And by "sympathetic imagination," he means

that to begin to write is to "know" what at the outset cannot be known except by inventing it, exactly, intentionally, autodidactically (Said, p. 349).

I have been offering a defense of a sequence of related and redundant assignments, assignments that define both a project and a way of working on a project, assignments that are designed to enact for students that there is no schematic method to make all things simple. And I have been arguing that an intellectual project requires indoctrination, assistance, interference, and trust.

Let me conclude with a passage from the poet, William Stafford.

A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them. That is, he does not draw upon a reservoir; instead he engages in an activity that brings to him a whole succession of unforeseen stories, poems, essays, plays, laws, philosophies, religions, or—but wait!

Back in school, from the first when I began to try to write things, I felt this richness. One thing would lead to another; the world would give and give. Now, after twenty years or so of trying, I live by that certain richness, an idea hard to pin, difficult to say, and perhaps offensive to some.

A sequence of assignments is repetitive. It asks students to write, again, about something they wrote about before. But such a project allows for richness; it allows for the imagination that one thing can lead to another, that the world can give and give. This is an idea hard to pin, difficult to say, and, perhaps, offensive to some.

Our students have come to us, however, to learn. It is not enough to say to them

that knowledge is whatever comes to mind. If we have them write one week on Democracy, and the next on Pollution and the week later on My Most Memorable Character, that is what we are saying to them. Tell me what comes to mind. The writing that I value, that demands something of me as a reader, that turns back on whatever comes quickly to mind, requires repeated and on-going effort. Students need to work at finding something to say. They have to spend time with a subject. That, to me, is what it means to be a writer at a university.

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