

Getting a little help from our (literary) friends

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Last year my department supplied its undergraduates with a list called "Faculty Fields of Interest." The list included the names of 56 full-time faculty members who had declared a total of 180 interests: 170 in traditional fields of literature or literary theory, six in creative writing, and four in rhetoric or expository writing. This fall these faculty members, with the help of four new full-time colleagues, some graduate students, and a few part-timers, offered undergraduate students over 100 courses or sections of English: 50 introductory sections in literature and 23 in expository writing; 35 upper-level lectures or seminars in literature and three in writing. To a typical member of the English department, these figures appear innocuous enough—and even encouraging: they suggest that, in these hard times, we have managed to attract and hold a substantial number of English majors. But to a writing program administrator (or anyone with a reliable pocket calculator), they suggest a common problem. Fewer than 10 percent of my colleagues list rhetoric or composition as a specialty, yet nearly 25 percent of what the department teaches is introductory expository writing. Of necessity, some specialists in literature must teach sections of expository writing.

When established faculty members or new Ph.D.s in literature are assigned to sections of expository writing, they frequently complain that they know nothing about teaching composition, except perhaps a few rules of grammar and punctuation, which composition specialists have told them are irrelevant anyway. With motives ranging from sincerity to self-protection, composition specialists have often concurred: teaching writing is not the same as teaching literature. And it's not. But at least one well-established area of literary studies—the study of manuscript drafts and revisions—connects directly with a new area of composition research—the study of the composing process. Scholars in both areas might strengthen that connection for the enrichment of their own research and writing. Certainly, writing program administrators might use the connection to encourage faculty members with traditional literary interests to transfer what they already know about literature to teaching writing.

One way to encourage such a transfer is with a short bibliography of scholarly or critical studies that discuss the drafting and revising procedures of literary writers—a bibliography that colleagues can supply. I posed the problem to several of my colleagues in this form: "I'm looking for articles or books that discuss the way authors write or revise their manuscripts. Can you recommend an important one—or a favorite—in your field?" If anyone looked puzzled by my question, I added that I was studying the composing process in my writing class and needed some examples. (Only later did I confess to some that I had set them up, that my motives were as much polemical as pedagogical.) The bibliography I assembled was as varied as the list of faculty interests—everything from Hayford and Sealts's discussion of the genesis of *Billy Budd* to the chapter in Brooks and War-

ren's *Understanding Poetry*, "How Poems Come About"; from the "Quarry for *Middlemarch*" reprinted in the Norton Critical edition of that novel to Jon Stallworthy's *Between the Lines* and *Vision and Revision*, two studies of Yeats's poetry; from an *ELH* essay called "Joyce and the Building of Ithaca" to one on revisions in "Lycidas," which everyone knew was a classic but no one knew where to find.¹

The composing process and textual analysis. All of these books and articles contain material descriptive of, or relevant to, the composing process. Some include material immediately useful in the writing classroom. Most important, however, these scholarly studies introduce, by means of familiar literature, three crucial aspects of the composing process: prewriting, drafting, and revising. And because they use familiar literature and are respected literary studies, they can allow us, as writing program administrators, to explore with a staff of literature-cum-composition teachers the strategies that professional writers use to avoid, or evade, the blocks that stop our less skilled student writers.

A work like Anna Kitchel's "Quarry for *Middlemarch*" might remind such a staff of the various techniques that Eliot used before she actually began composing: keeping a journal, describing scenes, recording isolated incidents, and constructing outlines and flow charts. These techniques might lead to a discussion of other formal and informal strategies for invention and discovery and then to a survey of the theories of such linguists and rhetoricians as Kenneth Pike, Richard Young, Ross Winterowd, Peter Elbow, and Ken Macrorie.² Another sort of manuscript study—Stallworthy's analyses of Yeats's working methods—might show in contrast a writer who composed almost without prewriting activities, using early drafts instead to record impressions, retrieve information, and hence discover his subject.

In *Between the Lines*, for example, Stallworthy notes that a consistent feature of Yeats's method was "to cut the material with which he began: seldom to add to it."³ The manuscripts of "Sailing to Byzantium" begin with an almost illegible fragment, no part of which survives in the published poem:

Now the day has come I will speak on of those
Loves have I had in play (—————)
~~I will now~~
~~I will go now~~
~~Loves have had in play, ()~~
That my soul loved ()

The fragment seems to be a preliminary thinking on paper, and its concerns are assertively personal—with no mention of the sages, emperors, or golden birds that appear in the final version of the poem, indeed, with no mention of Byzantium. Yet as Stallworthy explains, the draft contrasts those the speaker loved with his soul and those he loved only with his body, and this contrast leads to another: "but now I will take off my body." The opposition of body and soul, of being in the body and taking off the body, foreshadows the opposition of Ireland and Byzantium, which becomes the concern of the poem. Yeats has, in other words, talked himself into the poem in this preliminary draft, a draft that allowed him to use an uninhibited (and what Piaget would call an *egocentric*) mode as a means of discovering his theme.

One advantage that a composition director gains by using drafts is that the emphasis falls, automatically and effortlessly, upon the composing process rather than upon the literary product: far better to make this point to one's colleagues by studying the manuscripts of literary writers they know and respect than by railing against literature, or collections of literature like the *Norton Reader*. Further, by placing the drafts of two writers side by side, the manuscripts themselves will dispel any presumptions that a single method of composing is correct: George Eliot may have constructed a chapter outline for *Middlemarch*, but after studying Yeats's manuscripts, no composition instructor is likely to assert that the only path to polished writing is the formal outline. Manuscript studies perform more than polemical functions, however. All contribute to our knowledge of the composing processes of skilled writers, and some demonstrate specific strategies for drafting and revising.

In the "Conclusion" to *Between the Lines*, for instance, Stallworthy notes several characteristics of Yeats's manuscripts which would interest composition specialists: that the initial impulse for many of the poems was a personal emotion; that Yeats sometimes began composing by brooding on a pleasing word or phrase; that Yeats usually began composing in the first person, removing the direct personal statement and generalizing the experience as he revised.⁴ Some of these characteristics—and especially the last—correlate with research on composing such as Andrea Lunsford's study of the cognitive development of unskilled writers and Linda Flower's discussion of writer-based prose.⁵ Adapting Piaget's concept of egocentric speech, Flower describes writer-based prose as a form that uses a rudimentary narrative or survey framework as a substitute for analytic thinking; a form that includes words "saturated with meaning" that only the writer can understand, complexes of ideas assembled without apparent logical or causal connections, and highly elliptical language that leaves the reader without an interpretive context. Flower speculates that egocentric speech—and its written analogue, writer-based prose—may represent a stage in the composing process through which many professional writers pass on their way to a final product. Although Yeats's poetry is not in all features comparable to expository prose, his manuscripts and those of other literary writers begin to confirm Flower's speculation.

An example of revision: Richard Wright. Because literary writers duplicate some of the stages we associate with less skilled writers, we can use literary manuscripts—many of which include more details, more draft stages, than those of student writers—to study strategies for drafting and revising. At a staff meeting or faculty development seminar, two or three of these manuscripts might initiate a discussion of approaches to revision and specific tactics for transforming writer-based into audience-conscious prose. Were I to choose, I would select several drafts of an interview statement (one handwritten outline and six typescripts) composed by Richard Wright about the genesis of his autobiography, *Black Boy*, and about the influence of novels and other autobiographies upon his work. I would choose this text because it is a nonfictional narrative familiar to and sometimes taught by my colleagues, its manuscripts and many related documents are available in our library, and most important, it is an interview statement and hence a piece of expository prose, immediately applicable to the sort of revision that instructors of writing must teach.⁶

Wright's outline and early drafts contain almost classic examples of writer-based prose. In the first half of the initial draft, Wright follows a simple narrative arrangement, quite literally talking to himself, not so much about circumstances in the past that led him to compose *Black Boy*, but about the specific writing assignment—the interview statement—that confronts him now. The focus is egocentric, on the “I” who must compose; the narrative serves as a self-starter, as a reminder of what he wants to include in the statement. In the second half of the draft, Wright merely lists, in survey form, four books he remembers as influential and a few points he wants to make about them. As one might expect, the points are vague and undeveloped, causal connections are virtually absent, and the language is highly elliptical, its meaning often unavailable to anyone but Wright.

Even if they have read little research on composing, a staff of literature and composition instructors will recognize these characteristics of egocentric writing—and several others. Unfortunately, some may also want to discuss them as errors, confusing a purposeful draft with a piece of error-filled prose. By studying a series of drafts, however, they can discover the different functions of an early draft and a final product. Like outlines and flow charts, early drafts function as what Flower calls a “medium for thinking,” allowing the writer to manipulate stored information into a possible pattern of meaning. They are intended, after all, for the writer's eyes only.

The strategies for transforming early drafts into final copy may take a staff a bit longer to discover, if only because it is easy to confuse actual strategies for revision with mere editorial emendations. Wright, for instance, is a systematic editor, a model for undergraduate writers: he cuts superfluous words, he replaces passive constructions with active verbs, he combines simple sentences into more effective complex ones. But many of these changes only improve the surface appearance of his prose without altering its egocentric basis. Two seemingly simple tactics, however, accomplish significant changes throughout the manuscripts and work as catalysts for a major transformation in the fourth draft.

The first tactic—eliminating or altering first-person constructions—involves a shift in Wright's mode of expression from writer-based narrative to audience-conscious exposition. Apparently, as Wright edited his manuscript, he realized that he was only narrating or listing events, not explaining their significance. As a corrective, in the middle and late drafts, Wright shifted away from the narrative “I,” signaling a shift from the action itself to the meaning of the action. Such a strategy is not equivalent to the old textbook dictum, *Avoid the first person pronoun*. Rather, it supports the research of Lee Odell on intellectual processes related to growth in writing and Andrea Lunsford on the cognitive development of student writers. Odell and Lunsford argue that a shift in the grammatical subject of a sentence often accompanies a shift in thinking or perceiving and that we can measure growth in writing, at least in part, by following these shifts.⁷ Wright's manuscripts further suggest that a writer can self-consciously encourage these shifts in order to clarify his thoughts or discover his meaning—a point worth making to skeptical staff members who doubt that anyone can really teach writing.

The second strategy—eliminating repetitious phrases and sentences—once again resembles a textbook dictum, *Be concise*, but for Wright it is as much a method of revision as it is a rule of style. By first recording and then acknowledging repetitions, Wright discovers the common significance of the events he nar-

rates and the books he surveys. In early drafts he repeatedly mentions that the autobiographies that he read were true, and he also repeatedly comments that they allowed him to see things anew. As Wright removes these validating, but vague, comments, he must focus instead on *why* the books were true and *what* they allowed him to see, in the process discovering his thesis that autobiographical literature supplies other readers with new perspectives from which to view and interpret their own experience.

Coordinated faculty development: literature and composition. It seems likely that the revision strategies Wright uses in these manuscripts might differ from those that other writers practice—or even from those Wright himself uses in other manuscripts. Ideally, a staff of composition instructors would examine several series of manuscripts in order to accumulate and test a variety of strategies. A staff director would want to use these manuscript studies polemically but persuasively, to stress the acts of composing and revising as the core of composition instruction, rather than the more common substitutes—analyzing literary products and grading student essays.

In the best of all possible worlds, ideals, polemics, and persuasion would unite to produce a staff of instructors—graduate students, junior faculty, and senior faculty—interested in, and qualified to teach, composition. But most of us live in no such world. For reasons that Richard Marius has described in all his pessimistic clarity in a recent issue of *WPA*, the senior faculty at most colleges and universities will not volunteer to teach composition, and the linking of their scholarly interests with current research on composing, however persuasively it may be done, will have little effect on that decision.⁸ But among junior faculty members and graduate students, the possibilities are different, I think. Most of them have been hired and assigned (or want to be hired and assigned) to teach sections of expository writing; most of them want to teach those sections effectively; many of them also want to find a link between what they teach in the classroom and what they must publish for professional survival. Where desire and necessity meet, we have the grounds for developing a faculty skilled in both teaching literature and teaching composition.

The development of such a faculty would improve more than courses in expository writing. Earlier in this essay, I failed to calculate one of the important statistics: that while 25 percent of my department's offerings are courses in introductory expository writing, some 45 percent are introductory courses in literature. This percentage suggests that here, as at many other universities, the first and only English course that many undergraduates take is a course in literature. Although the writing in advanced placement sections of literature courses is consistently good, most instructors admit that in the general “Literary Interpretation: Close Reading in Fiction, Drama, and Poetry” it is sadly inadequate. The students in these courses could benefit from instructors who not only can teach literature but also understand the composing process and can teach strategies for effective writing. Even better would be a staff able to link literature and composition: for example, by teaching a short story in its preliminary stages as well as its final form in order to explore both the composing process and the literary product.

The alternative is a staff of literature instructors and a separate staff of composition instructors. I hope, however, that English departments can avoid this

separation, soon to become an institutional divorce, between literature and composition. The grounds for divorce may seem clear: I can almost hear the literature faculty citing "incompatibility" and composition teachers charging their literary colleagues with "extreme and repeated acts of professional cruelty." But this separation leaves no winners. Composition specialists need the knowledge that traditional literary scholars can offer about the composing processes of literary writers; literary scholars and critics need the new perspectives that composition specialists bring to the analysis of drafts and texts.

Notes

¹ Harrison Hayford and Merton M. Sealts, Jr., *Billy Budd Sailor (An Inside Narrative)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960); Anna T. Kitchel, "Quarry for *Middlemarch*," in *Middlemarch: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Reviews, and Criticism*, ed. Bert G. Hornback (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977); Jon Stallworthy, *Between the Lines: Yeats's Poetry in the Making* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) and *Vision and Revision in Yeats's Last Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); R. E. Madtes, "Joyce and the Building of Ithaca," *ELH*, 31 (1964), 443-59. I still have not found the article on "Lycidas."

² These theories and methods are usefully surveyed by David V. Harrington, Philip M. Keith, Charles W. Kneupper, Janice A. Tripp, and William F. Woods in "A Critical Survey of Resources for Teaching Rhetorical Invention: A Review-Essay," in *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*, ed. Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 187-207.

³ Stallworthy, p. 251. All quotations and discussions of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" are based upon Stallworthy's chapter on that poem.

⁴ Stallworthy, pp. 245-48.

⁵ Andrea A. Lunsford, "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," *College English*, 41 (1979), 38-46, and Linda Flower, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," *College English*, 41 (1979), 19-37. Both studies are reprinted in Tate and Corbett, pp. 257-92.

⁶ All descriptions of Richard Wright's composing process are based upon my studies of manuscripts housed in the Beinecke Rare Book Library, Yale University. Later this year, I hope to publish parts of these manuscripts and a discussion of Wright's composing process.

⁷ Lee Odell, "Measuring Changes in Intellectual Processes as One Dimension of Growth in Writing," in *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging*, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1977), pp. 107-32; Lunsford, *op. cit.*

⁸ "Faculty indifference to writing: A pessimistic view," *WPA*, 4 No. 2 (1980), 7-11.