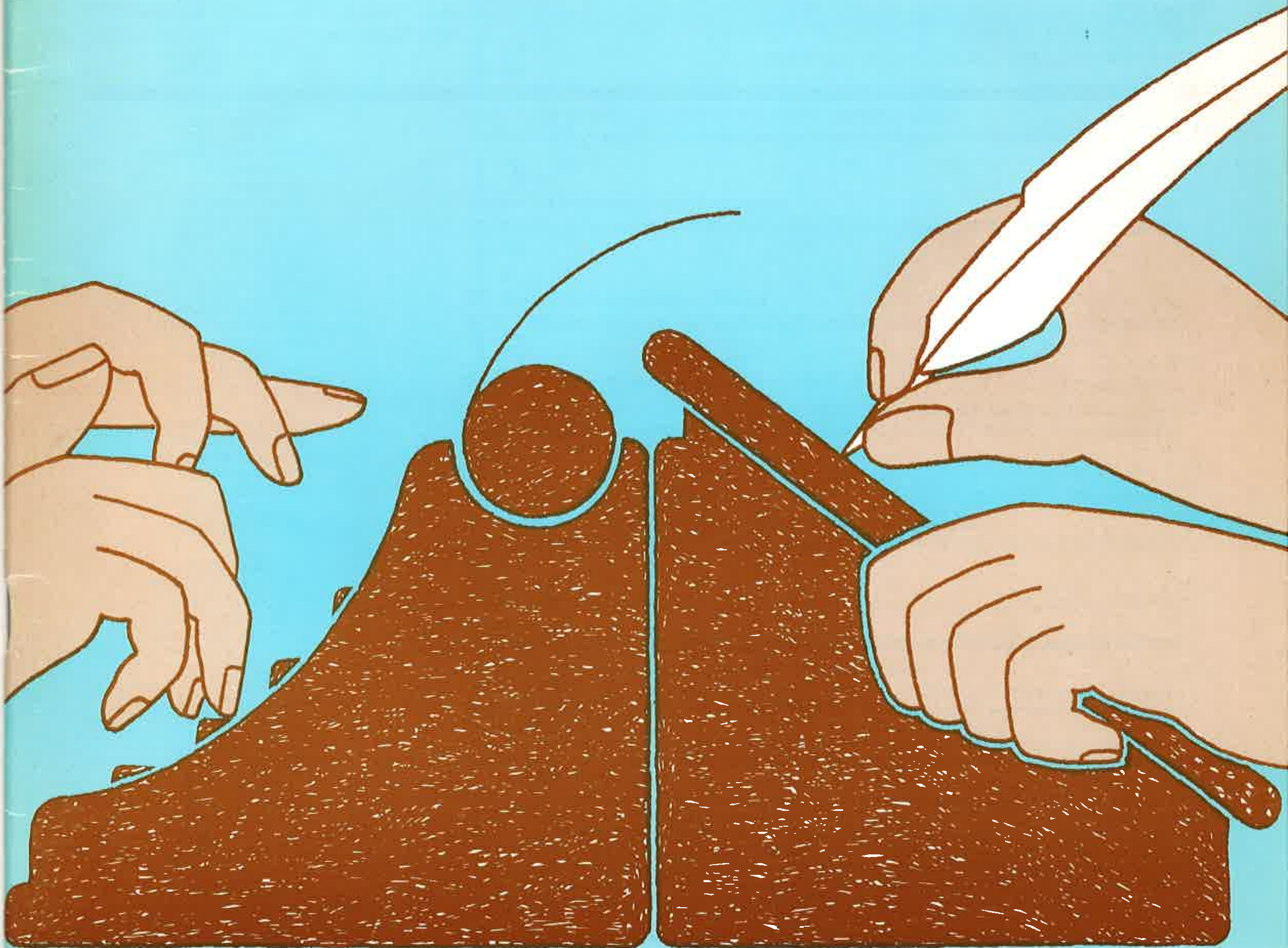
Teachers&Writers

Magazine/Volume 12, No. 2



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Teachers & Writers Magazine is published by Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 84 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10011. Issued three times a year, Fall, Winter, Spring. Subscription rates: three issues, $5.00; six issues, $9.00; nine issues, $12.00.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative's basic program is supported in part by public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, our publications by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a federal agency.

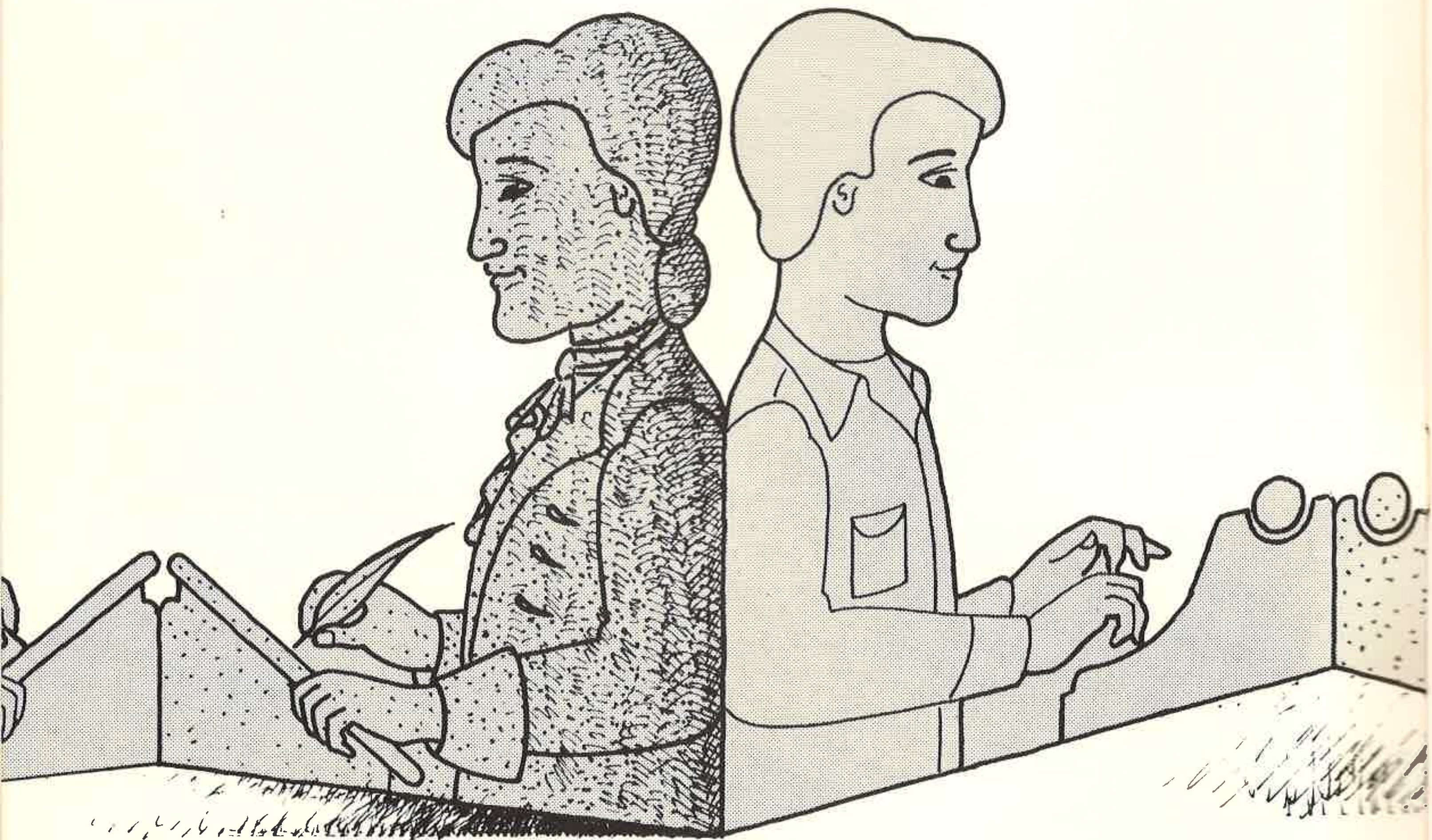
Our program is also receiving funding from Districts 3, 4, 5, and 6, Manhattan; Districts 8 and 10, Bronx; Hunter PTA, PS 3, PS 75, PS 84, PS 87, PS 116, Manhattan; CS 211, Bronx; PS 107 PTA, PS 309, PS 321 PTA, Brooklyn; PS 48 Queens; Lynbrook School District; Plainedge School District; ABC, Inc.; Vincent Astor Foundation; Chemical Bank; Citibank; Consolidated Edison; Equitable Life Assurance Corp.; Exxon Education Foundation; Edward Hazen Foundation; Mobil Foundation; Morgan Guaranty Trust Co. of N.Y. Charitable Trust; NBC, Inc.; New York Council for the Humanities; New York Foundation; New York Times Co. Foundation; Newsweek, Inc.; Helena Rubinstein Foundation; Scherman Foundation; Variety Club Foundation; Women's Fund of Joint Foundation Support.

This publication is available in microfilm from: Unviversity Microfilm International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

Our printer is Philmark Lithographics, New York, N.Y.

Imitation and Independence

The subtleties of writing, the author contends, are best learned by imitating proper models.



by Janice Thaddeus

SAMUEL JOHNSON SAID THAT "No man ever yet became great by imitation,"[1] and he is a dangerous man to disagree with, but my contention nonetheless is that no writer grows, no writer becomes truly independent, except by imitation. Greatness, after all, is the goal of the happy few. The rest of us—and most of our students—aspire only to write clear, emphatic prose. The puzzle is how to attain this elusive ability, and further how to disseminate the process and the results. Writing is such a complicated undertaking that no one can teach it by precept alone. Precepts always carry exceptions, and this phenomenon confuses students. In general, one can and must avoid the passive voice, but passives have their uses. Strong verbs are effective, but no pungent thinker can entirely banish abstract nouns. Indeed, a careful rereading of George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" reveals such a plethora of abstract nouns that even the most confident rule-monger must emerge somewhat abashed. Rules are useful chiefly in order to warn us what to avoid, but good writing is more open, less definable. Good writing must fit the subject, adhere to the idioms of our muscular English, define terms firmly, develop ideas powerfully, and link them deftly. How on earth does one teach such subtleties? The answer is—only by imitation.

Quintilian and Longinus advised a spate of mimicry. But only a few of the rhetorics now in use advocate an imitative approach. Edward P.J. Corbett, Frank D'Angelo, and others suggest copying passages, following sentence patterns, and similar exercises, but these theories are not widely enough practiced. Most handbooks of composition present rules rather than a series of models. Students tend to oversimplify the rules to make them more manageable. They try to write short sentences, to begin a fresh paragraph each time they have a "new" idea, to write "introductions" (interchangeable) and "conclusions" (ditto). When these rules prove useless, they request a better list. The chief imitative exercise our grade-school students practice is the sorry activity of copying swatches of the encyclopedia into "reports" on vast subjects dimly understood. They arrive in college, then, encumbered with a habit of plagiarism and a bag of general precepts.

JANICE THADDEUS teaches eighteenth-century literature and poetry writing at Barnard, where she is also director of Freshman English. She has published poems in a number of magazines and has one forthcoming in *New York Quarterly*. Her edition of the notebooks of the poet and novelist Lenore Marshall, *Invented a Person: the Personal Record of a Life*, was recently published by Horizon Press.

The trick is how to assign "imitation," differentiating it carefully from plagiarism. The solution is a double attack. First, the instructor must show student imitators how suddenly their prose will improve when they try brief imitative exercises. Second, the instructor must launch the students into choosing their own models. The specific assignments can cover a wide range. Students enjoy matching their own letters of dignified scorn to the template of Johnson's letter to Chesterfield. Macaulay's comparison of Plato and Bacon provides a structure for other juxtapositions. But for emphasizing the importance of approach, tone, parallel structure, and strong verbs, no text is more useful than Jonathan Swift's "Directions to Servants." Arguing from the point of view of a fellow-servant, Swift advises his confrères to further their own ends, always remembering that a hypocritical addiction to their employer's well-being is indispensable. In a recent course in Freshman English, I asked my students to imitate an excerpt from Swift's "Directions to Servants in General," of which I shall give a paragraph:

> If you are ordered to make coffee for the ladies after dinner, and the pot happens to boil over while you are running up for a spoon to stir it, or thinking of something else, or struggling with the chamber-maid for a kiss, wipe the sides of the pot clean with a dishclout, carry up your coffee boldly, and when your lady finds it too weak, and examines you whether it has not run over, deny the fact absolutely; swear you put in more coffee than ordinary; made it better than usual, because your mistress had ladies with her; that the servants in the kitchen will justify what you say; upon this, you will find that the other ladies will pronounce your coffee to be very good, and your mistress will confess that her mouth is out of taste, and she will, for the future, suspect herself, and be more cautious in finding fault. This I would have you do from a principle of conscience, for coffee is very unwholesome, and, out of affection to your lady, you ought to give it her as weak as possible; and, upon this argument, when you have a mind to treat any of the maids with a dish of fresh coffee, you may and ought to subtract a third part of the powder, on account of your lady's health, and getting her maid's good will.[2]

Here and elsewhere in "Directions to Servants," the loyalties of Swift's persona follow a clear hierarchy. He coddles himself, chiefly; if convenient, he will also abet a fellow-worker. His employers are dupes whose favor he needs, but whom he otherwise despises. He fulfills his assigned tasks only so as to advance his own position or line his pocket. He is also preternaturally lazy, and fully half his wiles are designed simply to save steps. For instance, he advises sliding plates downstairs like so many sleds, "and there they will lie ready near the kitchen door for the scullion to wash them" (p. 234). Swift's rogue uses sharp, idiomatic diction, brisk verbs, parallel sentences, effective subordination, and clear organization. In the passage given, the action is particularly vivid, and the organization is chronological as well as logical. The 154-word first sentence (which despite its length is absolutely lucid) gives a step-by-step description of the process of ruining the coffee and cunningly masking one's clumsiness. In the second sentence Swift's rogue suggests, by the sort of sly and specious reasoning useful to such a servant, that the footman should deliberately make weak coffee, stealing the excess.

Given this model, one of my students produced the following advice to her fellows:

> Always enter a classroom with a bemused hint of a grin. This lets everyone know that not only have you done the work for class but that you have mastered the material during a previous leave of absence in an obscure European village. Place your thoroughly worn out text on the table (after having given the book a good going over the night before—book marks are o.k. but German epigrams are better) lean back in your chair,

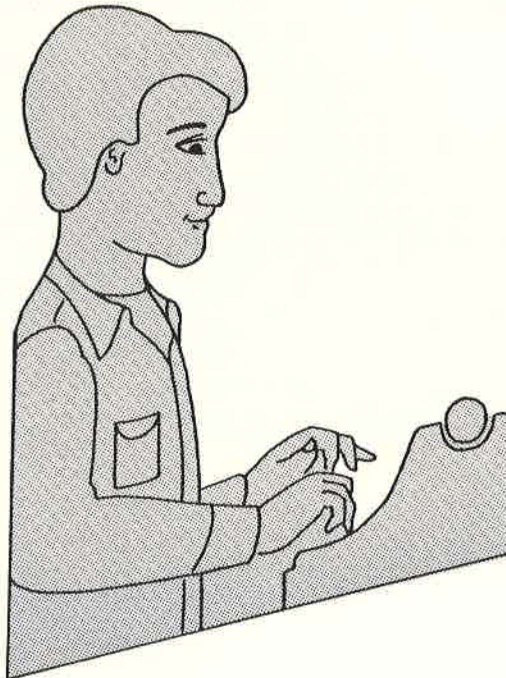
mutter the author's name and follow up with an obscure reference that you alone can decipher. Example. Ah. Dostoevsky. on ni snayet nichivo.

Errors in style and punctuation aside, this piece contains the vivid detail necessary to good writing. The logic is not entirely unexceptionable (how does a "bemused hint of grin" reveal your sojourn in an obscure village?), but the rhythms are powerful, and the paragraph moves both spatially and logically as the student arranges herself in the classroom and prepares to mutter her Russian. However, this student has missed the final filip. She fails to compliment her instructor for arousing her to such inspired mutterings. Still, she has learned to seek out strong verbs, to employ parallel structure, and to move inexorably from general to specific. Later in the course, in a paper on *Antony and Cleopatra*, she argued, "In the end, Cleopatra has declared herself 'fire and air,' rebuking the baser elements of earth and water. It should be noted that her ability to make such an assertion is further evidence of her confidence as a true queen. She is no longer concerned with material possessions, sensual pleasures and all the baser past." I would like to submit that without imitating Swift, among others, my student would not have been able to attain such prose. "Rebuking" strikes me as a particular Swiftian word.

Another, much weaker, student produced the following "Directions for a Baby-sitter":

> Sitting for a two-year old with parents who constantly insist on the child's obedient behavior, may not be very simple, especially if the child relishes to squirt out what was just fed into him. Or after being informed by the mother that the little one loves to, always will, and therefore MUST sleep on his stomach, you will subsequently discover that this bantling will slumber with his stomach facing you regardless of the innumerable times you turn him over. In such situations, where Mom does not see every side of her darling, keep in mind that it won't be your problem for long. Wipe the kid's face clean and your own if necessary and cast him to bed.

The task of imitating Swift elicited writing techniques which this student had never before attempted. For the



first time, she flexed the power to be found in strong nouns and verbs. She chose "*cast* him to bed" over weaker substitutes, and she enjoyed the romantic euphemisms evoked by "bantling." "Relishes to squirt" may not be idiomatic, but it is vivid. The period organization of "loves to, always will, and therefore MUST" is a reflection of Swift's many parallel structures. This student was not subsequently able to apply her new-found knowledge so well as her fellow classmate, and in her later essays the awkwardnesses which are apparent here often masked the vigor and control she had begun to learn. She was also occasionally hampered by the fact that she simply had nothing to say. However, it was she who, of all the members of the class, recognized most forcefully that she could develop her style by reading; it was she who most insistently at the end of the course requested a reading list to direct her toward good, imitable prose.

Mimicking Swift's "Directions to Servants" is not a mere classroom exercise, and an instructor can emphasize this fact by quoting Maria Delores Eliza Rosanna Gilbert, better known as Lola Montez — the nineteenth-century courtesan, dancer, and popular lecturer whose book *The Arts and Secrets of Beauty* has frequently been rediscovered and reissued. Her advice to men, although not strictly written in the persona of a fellow male, edges close to Swift's techniques, and contemporary students find the subject matter particularly appealing:

> Should you invite a lady out to supper, you must, by all means, order three times as much of expensive dishes as it will be possible for you to eat, as this will show her that you have a generous disregard of money and would just as soon waste it as spend it economically, which will convince her that your wife will never want for money, *i.e.* if you have any yourself.
>
> If it is not convenient to be so expensive, take the other extreme, and be as mean as possible. Condemn all dishes that cost over fifteen cents as being out of season or as unhealthy; and *all wines* you are to denounce as vile drugs, which you will neither drink yourself nor offer to those whom you respect. Then order ale for two, which, as she will probably not drink of it, you will have all to yourself; and, as you put the glass to your lips, blow off the froth, or head, and say, "*Here's you*" — a compliment she cannot fail to appreciate and admire.[3]

Montez has added the twist missed by both of my students — that the victim should admire the cozener for the very act which constitutes the cozenage.

More recently, Stanley Crawford has written a book entitled *Some Instructions*, of which the first section is "To My Wife: Concerning the Upkeep of the House and Marriage." Crawford's debt to Swift is obvious in this title, though by linking "house" and "marriage" to "upkeep" he has added the technique of zeugma, a kind of joining Swift rarely employed. Crawford insults the object of his instructions by assuming a superior position, outlining his suggestions in demeaning detail. In "Putting Things Away," for instance, he writes:

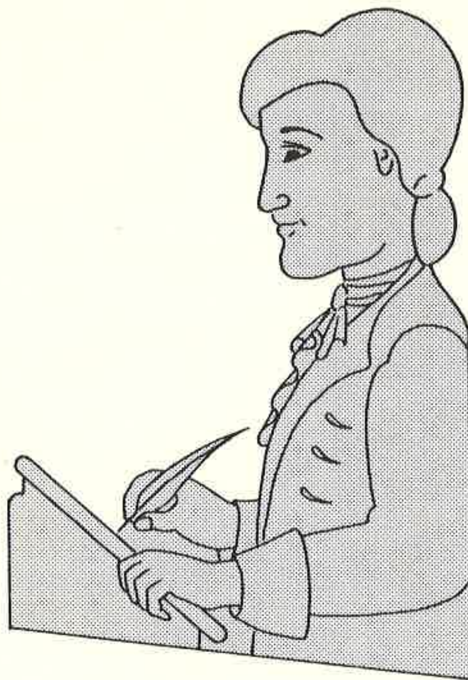
> Keep all things clean and keep them put away in their proper places, whereof you know, and take them out when needed and, when used, put them back into their places, whether they be cupboards, shelves, cabinets, boxes, sacks or bags, or the yellow or green trash containers under the sink; the ones made of plastic.[4]

Through this change in attitude, Crawford's speaker takes on many of the attributes of Swift's persona in "A Modest Proposal." The scheme is reductive, rather than manipulative. The speaker's sin is pride and a certain detachment rather than cupidity and a jolly animal good fellowship. Students who have attempted paragraphs closer to the methods of Swift's own "Directions" are more able to discern the sources of Crawford's humor and to recognize the need for similar choices when they undertake a writing task of their own.

Exercises like the one just illustrated can teach students a certain finesse in approach and attune them to elegancies which they ought to discern but need not always practice. For the daily task of producing critical papers, research papers, and other expository pieces, however, they need to find models among contemporary writers. To this end, I analyzed with my students the following paragraph from Carl R. Woodring's article, "The Narrators of *Wuthering Heights*":

> As judge, Nelly pronounces Heathcliff a "Black villain" and "evil beast"; Cathy a "wild, wicked slip" who "meant no harm"; and Joseph the "wearisomest, self-righteous pharisee." Cathy, she decrees, must be "chastened into humility." As interpreter, Nelly calls Healthcliff's a cuckoo's story—although she avoids assigning such a label to the later spiritual cuckoldry. As chorus, she lays aside superstition to proclaim happiness in the tranquillity of Cathy's death-chamber. In interviews, as attorney, she asks questions the reader wants asked. As in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the intensity of the passion lends credibility to the compulsive confessions; Nelly is the natural recipient of natural and unnatural confession.[5]

This paragraph illustrates that brief quotations are as useful as the hacked blocks of excerpts our students usually present us with. In addition, Woodring's method of organization functions both as a revelation and as a release. Even the most literate students have never consciously recognized that they can organize a paragraph by any technique other than a topic sentence with "development." Woodring's use of parallel sentence structure ("As judge," "As interpreter," "As chorus") opens a world of fascinating possibility and makes even topic sentences themselves seem more interesting. Woodring also illustrates another little-known fact: that paragraphs can be connected to one another by a clear and simple logic. Woodring moves from Nelly's judgments to her movements, indicating his shift by the three-word sentence which opens the next paragraph, "She also acts."



In direct imitation of this excerpt from Woodring, analyzing the same book, one of my students wrote:

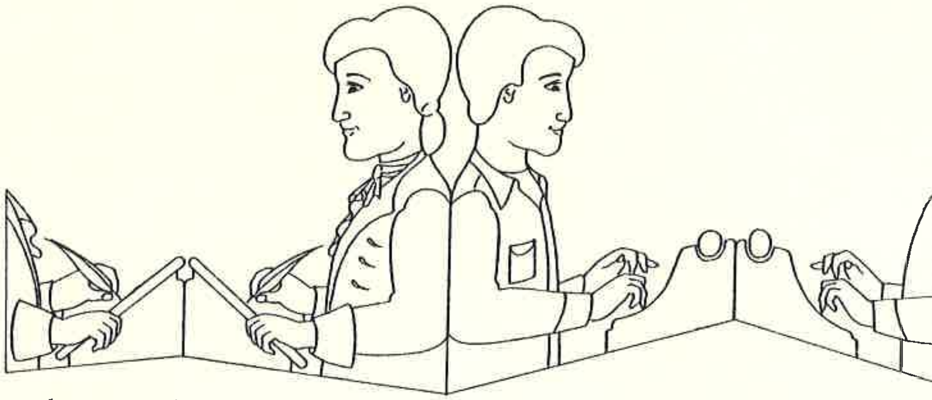
> Heathcliff's character is strongly fascinating because it is capable of jealousy, anger, despair and love, all acted in animalistic manners. To Isabella, Heathcliff is a mad man. To Catherine, he is an "unreclaimed creature, without refinement, without cultivation...He's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man." To Ellen Dean, he is "a bird of evil omen." The animalistic metaphors are truly significant. Their descriptions of Heathcliff help us to comprehend his complex character. When he held Catherine in his arms, keeping Ellen Dean away, she said, "he gnashed at me, and foamed like a mad dog." His upbringing caused his character to be ferociously animalistic, and full of stormy emotions. Either he hated someone or loved him completely. In her letter, Isabella wrote, "...his mouth watered to tear you with his teeth; because he's only half a man—not so much."

This student writes uneasily. "Animalistic manners" is unidiomatic, while "ferociously animalistic, and full of stormy emotions" represents a rather weak logical connection. The quotation from Isabella's letter at the end does not prove the statement which precedes it. Also, the writer is desperately in need of a more refined definition of "animalistic." Yet these mistakes are minor when one considers the fullness of the thought in this paragraph, the deft use of quotation for illustration. Left to her own devices, this student tended to write without point, without direction, summarizing plot in a general way. Her first draft consisted chiefly of rambling sentences like these:

> Over the three years that Heathcliff was away, he matured. He grew tall, handsome and intelligent, but perhaps, only outwardly; no one can really forget their abused childhood. The thoughts of the cruelty and beatings he suffered again reminded him to destroy the Earnshaws. This time he was wearing decent clothes quite different from the ragged child he was....

From Woodring this student has learned to quote eclectically, to gather her points into parallel sentences, and to supply transitional material in order to move toward a more general point. In addition, the excerpt from Woodring has taught her that she can link paragraphs through redefinition and contrast, as she illustrates in the opening sentence of her next paragraph, which reads, "But, even an animal is capable of love." Having once recognized how much clearer and more complex her prose — and indeed her thought — became when she imitated Woodring, she will now be able to continue teaching herself how to write by finding other models and applying their structure to her material.

To initiate the search for models is the second prong of the teacher's task. If imitation is to lead to independence, students need to seek out their own alter egos, authors they admire. The teacher might at the start make a few suggestions, but the chief point is for



students to begin to recognize that they are not perpetually producing "what the teacher wants," as if writing were an act of ventriloquism. The students themselves are writers, aiming eventually for a style equal in quality to the ones they read and respect. Students must discover, both in current literature and the classics, writers whose style they admire and would like to steal. They don't have to try for Shakespeare, but they might learn something from dropping their sentences into the forms supplied by Maynard Mack, Marchette Chute, Lewis Thomas, or E.B. White. This sort of burglary is not plagiarism, since the student borrows not ideas but sentence structure, not swatches of prose but plans of organization, not language but idiomatic, sinewy expressions. Once embarked on this search for models, students should recognize that they have begun a lifetime quest, picking up and dropping their chosen "instructors" as it suits them, gradually developing through this eclectic imitation a style and strength of their own.

Most students are seeking workaday prose, but even poets and novelists learn by imitation. One recalls that W.H. Auden, in an essay called "Making, Knowing, and Judging,"[6] suggests that every apprentice should find what Auden calls a Master, a poet to imitate. When choosing, it is best to find a flawed Master whose faults are obvious and avoidable and whose techniques are clean enough to be snatchable. If an imitator fears that he will lose his soul to his master and become a mere parrot, the reply is that the writer who imitates a specific model will seize a stronger style than the drifter who mistily reflects everything he has ever read.

Novelists, too, can gain by imitation, even if their initial education has been somewhat scattered. Harry Crews had little time for reading in Bacon County, Georgia, where he squandered most of his childhood creative energies simply to escape starvation. He initiated himself as a writer just after he graduated from college by devouring Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair:*

> I took *The End of the Affair* and I pretty much reduced the thing to numbers. I found out how many characters were in it, how much time was in it — and that's hard to do as there is not only present time in a book but past time as well. I found out how many cities were in the book, how many rooms, where the climaxes were and how long it took Greene to get to them. And there were a lot of other things I reduced to numbers. I read that book until it was dog-eared and was coming apart in my hands. And then I said, "I'm going to write me a damn novel and do everything he did." I knew I was going to waste—but it wasn't a waste—a year of my time. And I knew that the end result was going to be a mechanical, unreadable novel. But I was trying to find out how in the hell you do it. So I wrote the novel, and it had to have this many rooms, this many transitions, etc. It was the bad novel I knew it would be. But by doing it I learned more about writing fiction and writing a novel and about the importance of time and place... than I had from any class or anything I'd done before. I really, literally, ate that book. And that's how I learned to write.[7]

Crews certainly did learn. He has published eight novels and an autobiography.

Another spokesman for imitation is Mary Gordon, whose first novel, *Final Payments*, was published in the fall of 1978. Mary took my course in poetry writing ten years ago, and in a recent interview she summed up the experience by saying:

> I remember... learning whom to read, and how to read them, not as a critic but as a fellow writer, and learning how to learn from established writers. I think that's the most important thing you can do, to teach an undergraduate how to imitate, and what masters to choose.[8]

Sometimes even scholars immured in one profession need to apprentice themselves outside their field in order to escape the jargon they have imbibed. I know a sociologist who, despairing of learning prose style from his confrères, turned to a science writer whose politics he abhorred, but whose limpidity he marveled over. By closely imitating his chosen Master, he taught himself the techniques by which he has now become a highly praised stylist in his own field.

Perhaps no man has yet become great by imitation alone, but without imitation no man has yet become adult. Even Johnson, whose view was never simple, advised would-be writers to cultivate diligently "a habit of expression" attainable only through "a daily imitation of the best ... authors."[9] Only after this initiation can any of us take the final leap to originality. ●

Footnotes

[1] "The Rambler," 154, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss, V (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 59.

[2] *Satires and Personal Writings by Jonathan Swift*, ed. William Alfred Eddy (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 237.

[3] (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1969), p. 109.

[4] (New York: Knopf, 1977), excerpted in "O.K., Family. Hop to It! 1.2.3! About Face!" *New York Times*, 27 March 1978, Sec. A, p. 19.

[5] *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 11, No. 4 (1957), 302.

[6] In *The Dyer's Hand* (New York: Vintage, 1968), pp. 31-61.

[7] Steve Oney, "The Making of the Writer," an Interview with Harry Crews, *New York Times* 24 Dec. 1978, Sec. 7, p. 17.

[8] "Mary Gordon '71 Talks," Interview with Katya Goncharoff '79, *Barnard Alumnae* (Fall, 1978), p. 12.

[9] *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. and enl. by L.F. Powell (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1934), I, 100.

The Letter: A Practical Way to Teach Voice in Writing

by Thomas R. Moore and Joseph Reynolds

THE PROTAGONIST IN THE latest Philip Roth novel, *The Ghost Writer*, is an aspiring young writer who finds confidence in his writing ability when he is told that his writing voice is unique and peculiarly his own. "Voice begins at around the knees and comes through the top of the head," he is told. In other words, voice comes out of the inner being; it is the writer's natural and ingenuous language, his or her strongest asset.

Once students discover their own voices, all writing, whether formal or informal, becomes less of a chore. One of the best ways to teach voice and develop confidence in writing is to assign letters, an art form sadly neglected in our time. We encourage students never to pass up an opportunity to write a letter. Plus, we use letters as writing assignments throughout the school year.

Why? In a letter one doesn't put on airs. A letter to a friend, for example, forces a student to use language that is comfortable and natural—in short, his or her own voice. Such writing is the natural expression of the self.

Students inevitably have difficulty expressing themselves when asked to write formal papers. "How long does it have to be?" they groan. Writing a letter, however, demands that they reach within and use straightforward, honest prose. Thus, students are steered away from such pitfalls as plagiarism and paraphrasing. One always has more to say when he or she is honest and personal, and a letter provides this platform, a reason to be personal.

In addition, the writing of the opening and closing phrases "Dear _____," and "Sincerely _____," makes students aware of both voice and audience. Students realize that there is a real listening ear, interested in their logic, testing their thoughts. Writing becomes less of a task because students are sharing a part of themselves, extending an arm, waiting to embrace.

Students often wonder whom they are addressing in a paper. A letter provides an audience; someone is going to receive this letter and read it, even if it is only the teacher. Other kinds of writing do not guarantee this. One must write to an audience, however, if writing is to improve. Wayne Booth, an essayist and teacher of writing, paraphrasing Jacques Barzun, writes that "Students should be made to feel that unless they have said something to someone, they have failed."

Letter writing seems to elicit clear, simple prose from students more readily than does writing more formal papers. In a letter a student realizes that he or she is communicating and that communication is best achieved by writing simply and cleanly, a basic rule of crisp prose and of all good writing.

There are endless opportunities in the classroom to teach the letter in its varied forms. The business letter is one practical and useful form. We use the letter of application, for example, by asking students to write a letter in which one character in a story applies for a job: George, in *Of Mice and Men*, may write to the ranch for a job; Eben Adams, in *Portrait of Jennie*, may apply for the job painting the bar picture. In these letters, the student is asked to include his or her source of information, past experience, and a reference. Neatness and form are emphasized.

Writing an order letter to purchase an item from an advertisement is also useful. Ask students to bring in a magazine they read and order an item in correct business letter form. Another favorite with the students is writing complaint letters pointing out shoddy workmanship in an item (canoe, clothing, car, tape deck) and politely but forcefully asking for a replacement.

There is something about a letter that commands respect. Manufacturers, corporations, even city editors, take letters very seriously. A letter of complaint to a company, for example, gets good results. Students should be made aware of the clout inherent in a letter; a letter has a kind of power that outstrips a phone call or a personal visit. (Most companies figure that for every letter of complaint they get, ten are not sent.)

We sometimes ask students to imagine themselves as the character in a particular story, writing to another character. For example, Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* can write a compassionate letter to his sister explaining his departure. On a *Julius Caesar* exam this question was useful: "You are a Roman senator aware of the plot against Caesar. Write a letter to Brutus persuading him not to join the conspirators. You will need facts, foresight, and philosophy." On a Greek mythology exam students could write a letter to Zeus, pleading for Ulysses' salvation or condemnation, and thus judge Ulysses' past performance.

Students could also be asked to write a letter from themselves to a character in a story or to the author of the story. Once their imaginations are tapped in this fashion, wonderful things happen in letters, as students have a storehouse of good things to write about: a student may inquire of Emily Dickinson about a tricky line in a poem; or maybe another imagines discovering one of the seven poems she published in her lifetime and writing her about it.

Students may be asked to write letters in their journals on topics that interest them. These letter entries become an excellent way to get to know students personally and to make the class atmosphere more intimate and open. In journal letters we do not correct grammar and spelling, and the emphasis is on the message, what Stephen Dunning has called "low messages."

The point in letter writing is that the student is writing a real message to a real audience, a situation that creates authenticity in writing and exercises a shamefully neglected opportunity for personal growth. ●

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Poetry is Like Nothing Without the Poet

A journal account of working in the poets-in-the-schools program in New York, with some philosophical musings about the meaning of it all.

by Alexander McIntosh

IN DECEMBER 1977 I BEGAN keeping a journal of my poetry teaching in programs sponsored by the New York State Poets in the Schools. During the previous four years I had taught quite a few of these short-term workshops. (Six days over three weeks is average; fifteen sessions over the entire school semester is the longest I ever taught in any one school.) But my involvement in PITS then was only a casual, part-time one since I was also a full-time administrator in a music school.

When the music school folded during the fall of 1977, I decided to teach full time in PITS. PITS programs were plentiful that year, and from December until the following November (including a substantial part of the summer) I taught poetry workshops four and five days per week. There were weeks when I worked at as many as four different schools. These schools were as widely separated in character as they were in physical distance.

The journal excerpts that follow document something of the anxiety I experienced teaching in diverse situations, and also some of the problems I wrestled with about the nature of the poetry teaching experience both for my students and myself.

January 9, 1978

As if to justify my gloomy internal view of things, the weather turned cold, and in the afternoon snow swept through the streets.

I got to P.S. 102 in Brooklyn about five minutes late. I am to teach a fifteen-week program for gifted children in different grades. I met the principal in her office after about a five-minute wait. The secretary had seated me on a grey wooden bench in the hallway with two fifth graders, a boy and a girl. They both looked upset, and I assumed that they, like me, were afraid of meeting the principal. When the principal came out of her office, she looked at the notes the kids gave her and told them they could go home, since they were ill. I, on the other hand, could not go home, but could follow her into her office, which I did.

Since I am rarely correct in guessing about the way people will look before I meet them, I was surprised that she looks exactly the way I pictured her: short, grey haired, and maternal. Businesslike, also. After we had spoken for a moment she suggested we go to meet some of the teachers, who were already waiting for us in the library.

I had intended to explain briefly my plans for the program and then concentrate on finding out from them what *they* expected. This is important to do right at the start because PITS programs are so short that they can end without the poet or the teachers really understanding each other's intentions. But, instead, I talked incessantly. When I finished, their response was enthusiastic.

The fifth-grade teacher showed me a poem her niece had written in a PITS program in her school on Staten Island. Her poem was very good—excellent really—so good it scared me. I've never gotten poetry like that from any of my classes.

After the meeting, Mary Conners took me around from classroom to classroom to meet the kids I will teach. I was positively impressed with their appearances and the reception each class gave me. In each class I asked the kids who they thought I was. They suggested a number of possibilities: I could be a tester or an evaluator, come to check up on them; I could be the janitor come to fix the cracks in their windows. I finally explained who I really was, and I told them I had come to fix the cracks in their poems.

The terrible thing is that as Mrs. Conners introduced me to each class I felt a *click* somewhere inside me, like the sound of a taxi meter going on. And all the time I spent casually joking with the kids my inner eye was paying attention to the dollars rolling by on the machine.

Although I sense some future trouble from one or two of the teachers I will be working with, my overall sense

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is that, at last, I have found a school where the teachers are generally open enough and have enough enthusiasm to allow me the space and the time I need to *do something real.* My own cold and mercenary attitude troubles me.

On the drive home from Brooklyn, the snow was worse. For everyone else, as well as for me, winter seems to have set in.

Tuesday, January 10, 1978

Wind-chill factor is -30°.

I worry, worry, worry.

What is my problem? Am I afraid to fail in front of the students and the teachers? Which? Both? If I did fail, what would that mean? Disgrace for Poetry? Would that failure cause some harm to my own poetic life; I mean the life of my poetry?

I am afraid to be called "fraud," that's for sure. Why? Don't I really (and not so secretly) suspect myself of being a fraud? The profession of poetry teacher is new. What body of literature is there to support it and give it legitimacy? Those teachers and administrators who think that a poet is a kind of pixie who lives in a magical world (and there are plenty who think that way) are soon set straight. Sometimes set dead against. Who is left?—Those who are against the program from the start (shouldn't I be able to recognize them instantly?) and those who are genuinely in favor of the program because they know something about its value (something I don't know?).

It is the latter that I fear failing: those who have a clear vision of what a poet in their school could do. I don't want to fail them because failing them would be a real failure. P.S. 102, I am convinced, is genuinely interested in what I can do for it.

My first three classes were really successful. I was nervous and frozen in the first class, and I actually had to jump up and down to get myself unlocked. Whenever things got confused the native intelligence of the kids pulled me through. I felt a real rapport with them and found I could use the same material in each grade. I found they could handle not only the writing assignments but also *ideas.* To answer the question I put to them about the difference between poetry and prose, I suggested that a prose story is like looking through the window of a house from the outside, whereas poetry lets you look into the house from the inside. And you can turn around and look through the front window at the world beyond, from the insider's point of view. I wanted them to see that it is *ideas* that distinguish poems from prose, and I think they saw this.

I was so relieved at my success today that I felt like a cheat when I left after the last class. I wanted to stay around and give them something more, something to repay their sincerity to me.

Wednesday, January 11, 1978

Today I drove 100 miles to Southampton to give the half-day introduction to my workshop there at the Middle School. I met the principal, Dan Burns, and he immediately walked me into the faculty lounge, where the whole faculty was waiting for me. Since we had not spoken about the program previously (the PITS area coordinator had set everything up), I whispered to him, "How long do you want me to speak?"

He thought for a moment and answered, "Oh, about an hour."

I certainly was not expecting to speak for an hour, but I got through somehow. In fact, my audience was enthusiastic, perhaps too enthusiastic. After speaking with the three teachers whose classes I will be seeing, I came away with the suspicion that they are expecting too much from me.

I suppose that the ideal teacher to work with would be one who was confident of his or her own teaching, yet interested in what I was doing. Teachers whose hopes are inappropriately high, I think, want me to do things with their classes that they cannot themselves do.

Thursday, January 12, 1978

I think that I have improved a bit from last year. I seem to be better connected to my teaching line of approach. I don't get lost so often, and all the time I know what I am driving at. I think I am beginning to believe in this thing.

Somewhere over the last couple of years of teaching, I fell from my state of original grace that allowed me to operate on a high of continuous inspiration. Something happened. All my good ideas turned clunky and routine. My good ideas have been changed into obstacles that prevent me from transmitting poetry to my classes, that prevent me even from seeing poetry myself. My fight recently has been to regain that lost state, that combination of innocent enthusiasm and spontaneous invention that gave my teaching piquancy and was inviting and believable to my students and, also, to me.

The actual classroom teaching is working somewhat better now. My major logistical problem is what to do with myself between classes or after my last class. Under the PITS contract I am required to spend the school day at the school, but no one seems to know how best to use me when I am not teaching. I'd like to be available, but the problem is how to be both available and inconspicuous. The school pays quite a bit for the PITS program, and an idle poet in the halls rubs them the wrong way. I heard of a poet who made himself available in the lunchroom each day until, on one occasion, the janitor confronted him.

"Are you the poet?" The janitor asked.

The poet replied that, yes, he was the poet.

"Well," said the janitor, "come with me. The principal wants you to help me move this furniture..."

Wednesday, January 18, 1978

Snow turned to rain, but the rain didn't freeze. When I got up at 5:30 to leave for Southampton the roads were clear for the first time in days.

In my teaching today I suggested that we look at a couple of aspects of language itself microscopically...By the time a child is three years old he or she has mastered a complex of rules and their variables that govern the formation of words in the language.

The linguist Benjamin Lee Worf constructed a formula to illustrate the rules and variables of word formation that seems (and, emphatically is) most complex. I showed the class a blowup of this formula that resembles a difficult algebraic equation, and I suggested that, although they may never have seen such a thing previous to this class, they knew how it worked. To prove my point, I put these letters on the board:

S B L X

I asked them if this could be a word in English. They agreed that it could not be. I asked them what would be necessary if they were to make this a word, and they suggested that vowels would be necessary. I asked for specific

suggestions, and they responded with various vowels to be placed between the S and B and between the L and X.

"Why don't you need a vowel between the B and L?" I asked.

They replied that B and L *blend* together. I asked if you could have a word with B and L together in the beginning, and they said you could. I asked if B and L could be the last two letters at the end of the word, and after much argument they decided that the letters could not be alone at the end of a word. I asked them how they knew all this, and they answered that they didn't know how they knew. I showed them the formula again and said that they used it—or something like it—to make their decisions, and that they had learned how to do this even before they came to school, before they were three years old.

The fifth-grade class responded exceptionally well to this. Suddenly they all wanted me to speak to them in a foreign language. This was a great lead into another language exercise, an exercise in which I work with kids all speaking made-up languages. It worked well, with the teacher joining in the excitement. These kids really have a talent for expression with sound and movement. We had long conversations in which almost everyone went on and on in their glossolalic conversations.

Thursday, January 19, 1978

I have noticed that the third-grade kids have a strange language problem, a writing problem. They leave out necessary parts of their sentences, not only articles, but conjunctions and verbs. For example, if a kid wanted to write, "Take the vase off the fireplace," the sentence might come out, "Take vase fireplace." I have spent some time pondering about what I could do to call attention to the problem. I finally decided that I would have them read their written work aloud instead of me reading it for them. Some of them reacted with surprise to their omissions; others did not, but without being conscious of it, filled in the missing words as they read. Their teacher believes that this problem arises from the Open Court program that the whole school follows. This program teaches reading phonetically and emphasizes the oral over the written. The problem is that, since writing and thinking are more closely related than thinking and speaking, an inability in writing must be connected to an inability in thinking. Yes? No?

The teacher believes that Southampton is a culturally unique area—poorer, rather than richer, culturally. She feels that the parents of the local children, in their abhorrence of the rich, cultured "summer people," shield their children from what they believe to be negative cultural diversity. There is little opportunity for exposure to anything cultural during the winter's solitude here, except the library and the movies.

I want so much to get to the bottom of these questions. Given some more time here, I probably would learn many things. But six days! The days go by, and on the fifth day you have just got the kids to trust themselves to write freely for you, and you have just begun to trust them enough to give freely the real things of yourself, and it's time to go.

II

Reflections — Monday, January 30, 1978

For years I cursed Kenneth Koch's poetry exercises on a number of grounds. Although the exercises actually produced the *effect* of poetry, they were so structured and limited in scope and range that it would be impossible for kids to write poems on their own without Koch's matrices. Real poets do not write from formulae. But lately my opinions have changed. Koch's vision, I see now, is clear and comprehensive, but not matured, not thought completely through. Most of his success depended upon his own enthusiasm and the freshness of his material (as, I suppose, my own early success did). He had just come into the schools, and his pure idealism and naiveté carried him along. He never stayed in the schools long enough to bite the apple of knowledge himself, to fall from grace.

What poets need is material that works because it is indisputably poetic. Dream writing is an exercise that fits this description. Dreams always move and change. Their surprises may be limitless and infinite in variety. What are needed are exercises that do not demand that the poet fake enthusiasm, that can be used at times when the poet is feeling lousy, or quiet and shy, or so buoyant that he or she might float out the classroom window. But, for basic stuff, Koch remains (as Bill Zavatsky put it) the "father of us all."

When I see a poem, when I come across one in a magazine by accident, my first reaction is to turn the page fast or put the magazine down. My reaction is to defend myself from its complex of energy, much as someone who by accident encountered an atomic pile would run. A poem is a mass of energy. No one comes near if he or she is unsure of how to deal with it. My old teachers from grammar school and high school didn't know what to do with it, so they made us memorize. Or they taught us how to tear poems apart like Aztecs pulling out the hearts of their victims. My reaction to poetry is natural, I think. When you come upon something that looks as if it might explode, you deal with it in practical terms: learn what it is, or run away.

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The poetic writing experience for an adult is completely different than it is for a child. What, therefore, can the one have to say to the other?

My solution, so far, is this. While the experience of creating what might be called a fully vested poem is unavailable to most school kids—unavailable because they lack diverse experiences from which to pull images — it is helpful (and possible) to work on the ways by which poems are got to, to work on dream sources, memories, strange and new ways of looking at familiar things, and the mechanics of poetry, simile, and metaphor. I am sure others will object to my assertion that the mature poetic writing experience isn't there for kids. It is not there because part of the experience (and for the artist the most important aspect) of artistic creation is *controlled* outpouring of poetic material. Control requires a consciousness of process. The trick in making a poem, of course, is being able to create while watching what you are doing and guiding the whole thing without censorship. This is most difficult and requires years of struggle to accomplish. Not to censor, and to do the whole thing with taste and style—that is the trick.

A mature poet can be a superb juggler. Even in the simple process of making a good simile, the poet must juggle the elements. For example: "My father's face is like sandpaper." "Sandpaper" is (let us call it) Image #1. What is sandpaper? Rough sand. Where do you find rough sand? At the beach? No, that's smooth sand. Where then? On the desert! The idea of the desert, with its rough sand, its creatures and cacti, is certainly more

striking than the first image, "sandpaper." Image #2, the desert, and all its rough and spikey things, enhances the (call it) onomatopoetic, sensual nature of a man's face. The completed, worked image now is, "My father's face is like the desert."

The poet trains himself to become sensitive to a range of verbal resonances. As a linguist who studies not only the primary but also the secondary meanings of words, the poet listens for a word's particular kind of energy and force and arranges his words knowing everything about his business and yet producing a product which seems to have poured right onto the page without a seam. I remember hearing that "Stopping By the Woods on a Snowy Evening" came out of Frost spontaneously as he was completing a much longer and more difficult poem. That the thing just came out while he was immersed in something completely different is a magical happening, but consequent of having spent years writing poetry. An amateur can produce a brilliant poem, but he cannot continue to produce them; whereas, a poet can. Whatever children create that an adult would marvel at is a unique creation. The child will not be able to duplicate his or her action (unless to make a shabby copy of it) because he is not aware of the route by which he came to do what he first did.

Of course, there are poetic structures which kids can understand. And they can work along the same lines and produce a good piece ofwork. But what I am talking about is the kind of poem which an adult would find marvelous. For an adult to marvel at something, he must be surprised by its insight, the uniqueness of the target it hits. Kids hit great targets all the time—like that hit by my student Lucina from Southampton who said that when she got sucked up into the electric light socket she ended up in her father's bulb and then she was born, because "Lucina means *light*." I was struck by her birth image, her notion that before her birth she was travelling around in some kind of complex transmission system. But Lucina didn't have any idea that she was talking about her own birth. Neither did the student who reported hearing squeaky noises coming from his mother's bed and rushing in to see a vampire on top of his mother sucking her blood know that he was putting two plus two together in the classic manner to explain those strangely primal noises.

It is only possible for children to make poetry out of the experiences they have had. Poets are truly vested as poets, as mature writers, when they are able to embrace, or even acknowledge, the overwhelming concerns of the adult population — the concerns of those who must take the consequences of their own actions unprotected by guardians, and who, of necessity, must consult the advice of their wider experience in their fight to push on.

What is missing in a kid's creative experience is *solitude*. That factor is prerequisite to the mature artist's ability to create. Solitude is first a condition of essential loneliness, an original human paradox, common to all but impossible to share. For a writer, solitude is in the beginning only a working condition, just part of the job as the freezing air is to a car mechanic who must work outdoors in winter. Gradually, solitude becomes a kind of place itself. The experienced writer goes there to spread out his tools, like a surgeon, to get ready for the operation. At the same time, solitude is portable and accessible anywhere. Years spent alone, or months, days, or hours are not necessary for the experienced writer to reenter solitude. It is enough only to remember it, and you are there. Perhaps *solitude* is a glorified word for *concentration*. But I think it is a particular kind of concentration, won only by a long-standing commitment to writing—and this is the thing kids lack.

I must have lived in solitude until about kindergarten, and then I began moving out of it, confronted as I was by the lives of other children. Children become confused between the world of others and their own at a fairly early stage, and they are led to ignore their precious solitude by the *tabula rasa* dogma of the schools. The *tabula rasa* idea exists in every school I've taught in, no matter how open each says it is in its educational methodology. If teachers have abandoned the notion that humans have an innate capacity for creativity—which is the opposite of *tabula rasa* — and if teachers themselves do not any longer know how or care to create, how can they lead their students to create? Impossible!

Poets often talk about "getting the kids at the right age." What does that mean? They answer, "Get them before all the creativity has been talked out of them." But if the creativity goes out, where does it go?

Some exercises that poets use bring the kids back to solitude. But, I bet that the ocean of the rest of the world, which itself does not want to go in the direction of solitude, will soon suggest more important directions.

When I talk about kids' poems, I am talking at the same time about poems that teachers, PTAs, and others call "delightful" and poems that are genuinely good. The two are usually different. Teachers are interested in educational issues. PTAs are interested in kids having special *experiences*. Other support groups, like BOCES,* are interested in providing alternatives —exciting changes. The people in these groups are often literary enthusiasts only, who do not (and why should they?) have the personal background in writing from which to tell what is good and what is not in kids' poetry. Their jobs often depend on a basically static, formula-oriented educational system, which attempts to contain the kids, much as a corral contains horses. Their training does not cover the possibility of the horses walking back and forth through the gates. Therefore, when a kid does go outside the formulas, he or she is marked "absent," that is, invisible. I have found that when a poem written by a kid does make it outside the gates, I usually have to point out its virtues to the teacher. Some teachers do not understand me. I discovered this when working with a kindergarten class which I asked to draw pictures of different things that we would later relate to words and sounds. One assignment was to draw God. The kindergarten teacher nervously went around the room "correcting" the pictures by renaming any that she believed strayed from the "truth." For instance, one kid drew a snakelike monster and wrote beneath his drawing GOD. The teacher quickly crossed that out and wrote CREATURE.

Children have to be led to their solitude if they are to write poetry for real. Because of the nature of their educational environments, the probability of their finding solitude again before they have reached adolescence is small. For now, as one kid wrote yesterday when we were practicing similes, "Poetry is like nothing without the poet." ●

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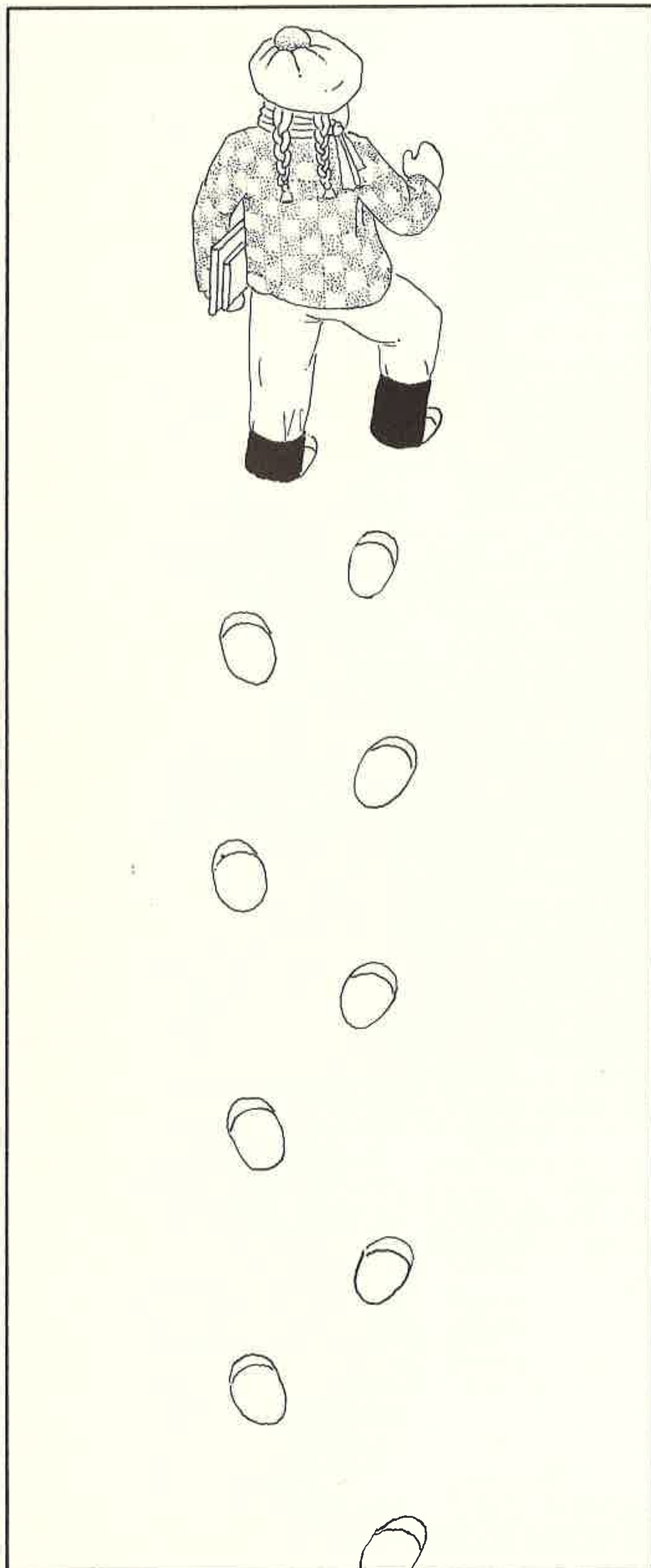
*Board of Cooperative Educational Services

The Haiku Connection

Countering the misconception of the syllabic nature of Haiku.



by Adele Kenny

HAIKU POETRY, WHICH HAS ITS ORIGINS IN AN older Japanese form called *hokku*, has become increasingly popular in American schools since the 1950s. Almost any textbook offering lessons in poetry mentions the form, and whole handbooks have been written to aid in its instruction. Children respond amazingly well to the directness and clarity inherent in haiku, and there are no figures of speech or clever devices required for haiku composition. For young children who have trouble conceptualizing things they have not actually experienced, haiku is *not* concept oriented; its focus is things, here-and-now realities that even very young school children can re-create from their own experiences. I am reminded here of the third grader who wrote one snowy day:

walking to school
in snow—
heavy boots!

He knew exactly what he was writing about, and his readers readily identified with it. In addition, he had made the connection between nature and human nature which often characterizes strong haiku.

Haiku poems have a quality that has been called "evocative" and "elusive" at the same time, and although it is a particularly demanding and difficult form to master, its practice has some valuable and satisfying applications for elementary school students. However, a question arises at the outset regarding the content and definition of "haiku form," and any serious discussion must be prefaced by some defining. Under the instruction of Bill Higginson, haiku poet and editor/publisher of From Here Press, I have learned what haiku is *not*; and what haiku is not is what the teacher usually believes it is! Contrary to common belief, haiku poems are *not* comprised of a syllable pattern of 5,7,5 set into a triolet. This definition of haiku is a Western-world adaptation and—although often taught as such in our schools—is, in reality, a mistranslation of the Japanese *jion* or *onji*, which have been mistakenly equated to the Western concept of the syllable. The seventeen *jion* found in many traditional Japanese haiku do *not* equal seventeen syllables.

By the time I became creative writing specialist for the Rahway Public Schools and an artist-in-residence for the Middlesex County Arts Council, a good many classroom teachers had had years of experience in teaching 5,7,5s and

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calling them haiku; most of the textbooks concur with their teaching. A lot of the haiku I was given to read were "cute," cluttered with sentimental generalities, and padded with superfluous words in obvious efforts to make the seventeen syllables. What struck me most, however, was the potential for good haiku and the interest in the form that I was seeing in classrooms throughout my district. I wanted to help move the kids toward a better understanding of the form defined in *The Haiku Anthology* (Anchor/Doubleday, 1974) as, "unrhymed Japanese poems recording the essence of a moment keenly perceived." This would be a rough idea to present, particularly for a guest teacher conducting poetry workshops in a number of schools, faced with the problem of undoing prior teaching and, more than likely, offending the classroom teachers with whom I was trying to establish a comfortable working relationship (essential for keeping my job). Of course, I could simply follow the old, "when in Rome..." policy with certain teachers, which I did, in true cowardly fashion, for about a year. The teachers loved my "haiku" lessons, and the children wrote some fairly sensitive poems (laced, however, with far too many *as*, *ans*, *thes*, and *beautifuls* in order to fit the form). I wasn't terribly happy about the whole thing though. And it finally occurred to me that it needn't be an either/or situation, that I might successfully (tactfully) present both definitions and capitalize on the controversy in the process.

I started by discussing the 5,7,5s with which most of my classes were already familiar. With younger children I used haiku as an extending activity in reading, having them practice word-recognition skills by clapping out the syllables in poems they had written. Later, I went into a bit of haiku history, explaining that the Japanese haiku from which our variety evolved are usually shorter, use fewer words, deal with images, and don't have to contain seventeen syllables. At this point I read some translations from *thistle/brilliant/morning* (haiku by Shiki, Kekigodo, Santoka, and Hosai), and some more from *The Haiku Anthology* (English-language haiku but far from 5,7,5's). We talked about images, how they create mental pictures with as few words as possible, and, in an exercise in compression, the children wrote images like the following:

footprints in the sand (Kerri Crowell)
wind blowing snow (Derek White)
the sound of crickets at night (Robert Fleischman)
dead trees (Jimmy Guinta)

Younger students, first, second, and third graders, clapped out the syllables in their images. We talked about the differences between, "there are footprints going all over the sand," and the more direct, "footprints in the sand." We discussed "throwing away" extra words and making every word we used count; 5,7,5s were, at least for the moment, forgotten. Older children, fourth grade and above, began to consider the differences between sentences and phrases. The importance of our sense perceptions and how we react to them was explored. In subsequent workshops, moving closer to real haiku, we talked about writing two images which connect somehow. After more reading from *The Haiku Anthology*, the children began to make some real haiku connections:

a green Christmas tree
in snow

—Randy Huxford, grade 2

a flower
rising
from dirt...

—Earl Rankins, grade 2

Falling bricks
echoing
in a dark alley.

—Lisa Kunie, grade 4

Eggs cracking
over a pan...

—Corri Flynn, grade 4

blackboard:
fingernails scraping.

—Kelton Harrell, grade 6

red apple
falling,
brightening dark ground

—Eddie Vorasi, grade 6

At the end of each writing session, children were encouraged to share their haiku through oral readings. We even got into some oral interpretation as students experimented with tone, inflection, and volume; and during these readings, the importance of punctuation (or lack of it) was illustrated.

The workshops in haiku continue to be excursions into the intrinsic beauty and intense simplicity of an Eastern style. They are also points of departure for practice in a wealth of skill areas. The un-5,7,5s I have been teaching are widely accepted now in my school system, even by teachers who had previously thought that anything less than seventeen syllables could not be a haiku. The connection has been made! ●

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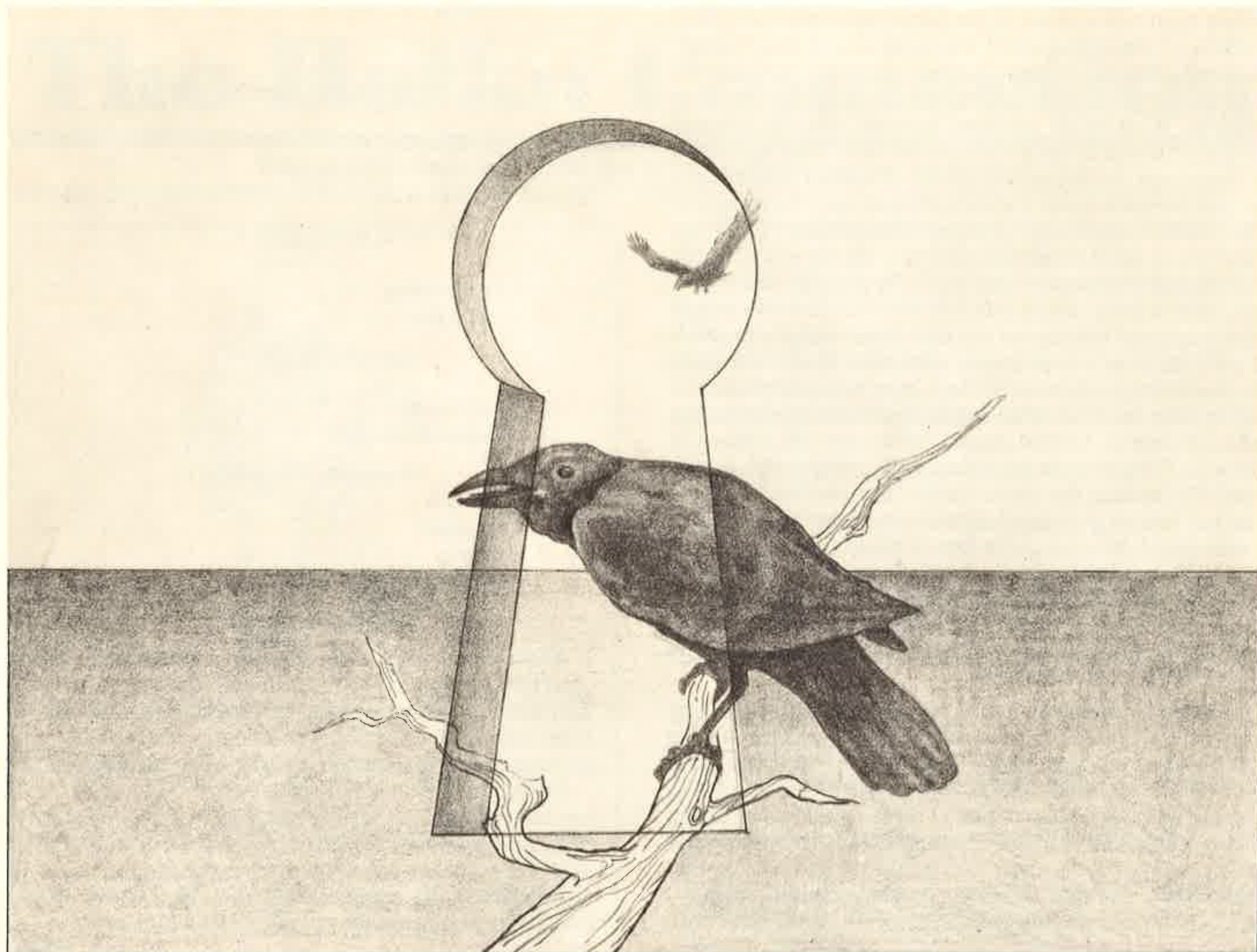

Haiku—The Discipline of Language

by Anne Cherner

MY TWENTY-SEVEN WEEK RESIDENCY AT MANhattan's P.S. 87, at 78th Street between Amsterdam and Columbus Avenues, was three-quarters over. The anthology of poems from the two fifth and two fourth grades I had been working with was finally revised, edited, and handed over to the printers. I had hoped that, with the work of the book behind us and the promise of it as a finished object ahead, the children would go on to write even better poetry, to fuse imagination and experience into a third eye whose vision might reach into the mind and beyond it.

ANNE CHERNER was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama. Her poetry has appeared in over twenty different publications, and she has received the *Mademoiselle* Poetry Prize, Radcliffe's Joan Grey Untermeyer Award, the Alabama Arts Festival's Hackney Literary Award, the Academy of American Poets Prize at Columbia, and the *Black Warrior Review* Poetry Award.

But as winter was finally giving way to spring, I felt as if a pall had settled over my classes compounded partly of restlessness and of laxity. Perhaps it was due to the inevitable emptiness that follows the completion of a large project; the transit strike that unofficially lengthened Easter vacation may also have contributed to the feeling. I noticed it in the work the children were handing in: so much of it, like their attention, seemed to lack focus. I had spent most of the year working on poems interspersed with short prose pieces, but now I felt dismayed by a looseness in much of the writing. I realized I had still not taught them the discipline of language.

I had assumed that they would acquire this discipline as a natural consequence of applying themselves, week after week, to writing poems. Now I wondered what method would be best to teach them how to convey meaning in their writing, how to be concise and selective, to make their lines taut and clean instead of slack and muddy, to opt for the active construction rather than the passive one. And, consequently, to think in artistic terms: to learn to look for the words which could recreate the experience of an emotion rather than describe it, to suggest rather than to state. And, I wondered, how would I manage to teach these principles in a

way that would be a discovery, for them and for me, rather than a lesson in diction and syntax.

Method

Holding these goals in mind, I decided to use the haiku as a means to achieve them. I must confess here that my previous attitude towards the haiku had been one of slightly veiled condescension. I had associated the haiku with the boring 5-7-5 syllabic count and the vague, all-encompassing subject of "nature." However, I was lucky enough to come across an excellent book that I unreservedly recommend to any teacher or student of the haiku: Hiag Akmakjian's *Snow Falling from a Bamboo Leaf: The Art of Haiku* (Santa Barbara, California: Capra Press, 1979). Akmakjian has placed the haiku firmly within a historical, literary, and philosophical context; he illuminates the multiple concerns behind this most condensed of literary forms, and his translations and discussions of noteworthy Japanese haiku are laudable.

The first day I brought in xeroxed copies of eighteen Japanese haiku translated by Akmakjian: in the forty-five-minute lesson we would go over several of these and return to the others subsequently. "The haiku," I told the class as I passed out the papers, "is the briefest of literary forms: just three short lines. Yet the haiku gives a picture of an entire scene, of a landscape. There are no words wasted in a haiku." I asked if any of them had ever looked through a keyhole before. Most children nodded their heads. "Think of a haiku as a keyhole," I said, "just a chink of light but through it you can see a whole room."

I asked a child to read one of Basho's most famous haiku:

> on the dead branch
> a crow settles—
> autumn evening

Then I asked the class to describe the scene. "Even though a haiku is so short," I said, "you should be able to tell from reading it the season of the year, or the time of day." (By the way, children love to read aloud; it's a good way for them to be active participants in the lesson as well as gain experience for reading their own poems.)

One child said, "I see a place like a desert with nothing there but a dead tree and a crow flying down to sit on it." Another child said, "I see a forest, but all the leaves are down and it's dark and there's a crow on one of the branches."

Because we had often discussed how a poem differs from, say, a math problem since there is no one "right answer," it was not difficult to explain that both interpretations were "correct." "Find the clues in the poem," I said, "and go on from there." I then asked them what colors they saw in the landscape. "Black and grey," said one child. "And orange and brown and yellow because of the leaves," said another.

"What feeling do you get from the haiku?" was my next question. "Spooky," said one child. "Lonely," added another. I asked them if it was quiet or noisy. They'd all felt the silence in the poem. Then I summed up: "See how much you were able to tell just from those three short lines." We read the poem again, and I emphasized how they were able to detect the feeling in the poem though no feeling was mentioned. "That's extremely important," I reiterated. "A haiku always suggests a feeling without stating it directly."

We read another of Basho's haiku:

> the old pond—
> a frog jumps in
> plunk!

We decided that the poem was set at summer sunset, the time when frogs come out. The class described with great relish a pond lined with rocks and moss, with green plants waving in the water, the sound of the frog hitting the pond and the water drops splashing all around, the feeling of peacefulness broken by the sound of the water, the humor.

In the same manner we discussed other haiku of Basho from Akmakjian's book:

> stillness everywhere
> the cicada's voice
> pierces rocks

> first winter rain
> the monkey too seems to want
> a little straw raincoat

> there is no one here,
> the road is empty,
> and evening is falling

> how nice to take a noonday nap,
> feet planted against the wall,
> how cool the wall

In every case the children were able to describe with increasing excitement and intensity the seasons and times of day, the setting, the sounds and sights, and the feelings evoked by the haiku.

I worked some historical information gleaned from *Snow Falling from a Bamboo Leaf* into the discussion. Basho (1644–1694) was the father of haiku poetry and the most famous of haiku poets, even in his own day. I told them the well-known story of Basho's "Biwa haiku." Biwa is a mountain lake in Japan noted for its beauty, particularly its eight fabled views, one of which is Mii-dera, a temple overlooking the water. Someone challenged Basho to put all eight views into the three short lines of a single poem. But Basho did the impossible:

> seven of the views
> were obscured by mist.
> the eighth? I heard Mii-dera's bell.

The children elaborated the scene: the blanket of mist over lake and mountain and, heard in the distance, the pealing of a bell.

After we'd discussed several haiku, I called their attention to the fact that each haiku is about one thing: one frog instead of a chorus of them, one crow instead of a flock of crows, one dog instead of a dog and a cat. And, even more importantly, the subjects of the haiku are usually ordinary instead of exceptional. For instance, I asked, would a haiku be more likely to be about a rainbow or a weed?

As far as form goes, I avoided the question of syllabics when possible. In the cases where either a teacher or a student asked about the seventeen-syllable length, I told them that I was not requiring them to count syllables because the English language has more polysyllabic words than the Japanese (according to Akmakjian) and because even in Japanese you find haiku from twelve to twenty-five syllables. It was more important, I added, that they try to write haiku which conveyed all we had discussed. I also noted that they did not have to write titles for their haiku or worry about capitalization or punctuation except where necessary, that they did not have to write in sentences. Most important of

all, they were to try to use the fewest words to express the most, to suggest feeling instead of stating it, to try and write as many haiku as possible, and not to worry because the more they wrote the easier it would get.

As they wrote, I went from desk to desk, helping them individually. I found this was the most important and helpful part of the lesson, because in concentrating on the words themselves the children were able to grasp some principles of compression. I noted the importance of the precise word, discouraging the use of *beautiful*, *gorgeous*, or *pretty*. "A jewel and a peacock are both beautiful," I said, "but not very much alike. Try to pick a word that makes us see what you are writing about."

In the subsequent lesson we reviewed the principles of haiku, with class reading and discussion of additional haiku and then writing. Some children caught on quickly; others had more trouble. I found it helpful to suggest that they picture a scene in their minds before writing the haiku; I advised the use of verbs and active language. After three lessons with three classes (and two with one particularly attentive fifth grade that I taught first period when both of us were still fresh), nearly everyone had grasped the principles of haiku, and some had written lovely poems.

With a form as brief as the haiku, I was able to work individually with a substantial number of students even in a relatively large class. My approach was similar to the one described above: I would ask the "writing-blocked" child to describe to me the image he had in mind while writing and by questions force him to form a more precise vision. Usually this was enough to spark the language, but sometimes I would suggest a word or image. I found that the limits imposed by haiku made the children focus intently on finding the few words that would embody their conception: they were at last acquiring discipline in their use of language.

The Children's Haiku

Some of the children's haiku succeeded in distilling the essence of a season, for example:

Winter night—
snow falls quietly
on people's tall hats
—Miles Chatain

An autumn day—
a discarded can
rolls in the wind
—Guy Stoneman

First summer drought—
even the leaves cower
trying to get some shade
—Daniel Dwyer

Others caught a feeling entirely in a landscape:

Animals wandering
trees standing tall
everything is silent
—Andrew Ehrlich

in the dark field
a wolf howls
at the moon
—Ikuko Murakami

Slipping through the forest
freshly showered with rain
branches like bats slithering by my face
—Chris Sauer

the pond rippling
green, swaying, cat lilies
a soft rain has passed
—Jessica Schanberg

In a tunnel
people cry out
to hear echoes
—Rebecca Levine

Others got close to the life of animals:

The worm looks down
and sees an ant so small
the ant sees a giant
—Rachel Sherrow

On a rotten log
a frog sticks out
his tongue for flies
—Rebecca Levine

cockroach used for science
it dances
*when rain comes**
—Adam Lynn

A crow
hovers over the cornstalks—
flies away
—Molly Olsen

Other haiku were remarkable for the range and intensity of the feelings they developed:

A silk dress
flowered pink and yellow
slipped on a hanger
—Jessica Schanberg

Through the keyhole
my grandfather ages
slowly
—Leonor Camche & Vicki Greenwald

Birthdays so short
take so
long to come
—Daniel Dwyer

A pair of sneakers
lying on the rug—
empty
—Linda Greenwald

And, in closing:

Martha Washington
Splinters in her lips
George files down his teeth
—Alison Dabdoub

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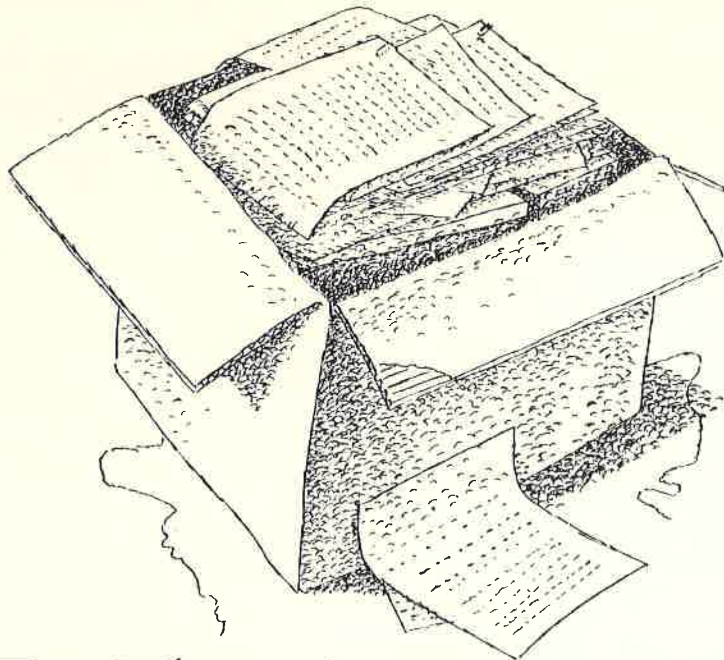
*By way of explanation, Adam told me the English had developed this practice.



My Early Years as a Fiction Writer

by Katharine Ericson

RECENTLY I FOUND ONE OF those treasures that take you away from your legitimate pursuits for an entire afternoon. What I found was an old carton of report cards, snapshots of friends long forgotten, strange mementos of school proms, and, best of all, my first serious piece of fiction, produced when I was in seventh grade.

This manuscript was quite neatly written in pencil on narrow-lined notebook paper, in a script somewhere between the manuscript printing we were taught in a progressive elementary school and the cursive writing I would develop as an adult. The piece was a fairly lengthy short story entitled "The Rum Runners." It was based on the scraps of information I had gleaned as an inquisitive child one summer on Shelter Island, an island at the end of Long Island, New York, where our family vacationed during the 1930s.

That summer, I recall, we would sometimes hear loud noises in the night, offshore somewhere. As we kids wandered the tree-shaded streets near the cottages and the resort hotel, there would be a muffled explosion, and we would note it casually, not really very curious about its origin. But one night I sat with the grown-ups on the rocker-lined porch of the old wooden hotel, and when the noise occurred I overheard someone say, "I'll bet that's the Coast Guard firing on the runners." There were murmured conversations from the rockers on down the line, and I could sense that the adults were getting quite a thrill out of the distant noise.

"What's a runner?" I asked the elderly man in the rocker next to mine; but I was turned aside with some vague, incomprehensible reply. In fact, the talk died down noticeably in the chairs immediately surrounding me.

This only whet my appetite to find out more, so I took to eavesdropping quite a lot, hanging around the porch or the lobby in the evenings right after dark. By persevering, I discovered that there was a law called Prohibition, and that it was suspected that liquor was being illegally brought into the United States by boat via Shelter Island. The liquor came from countries across the ocean; I wasn't quite sure what or where they were, having gone, as I mentioned, to a progressive school and never having learned geography.

My short story told of a young girl on a resort island who stumbles on a remote cottage where illegal liquor is being delivered. After a dangerous brush with the "runners," she cleverly and single-handedly breaks open the whole operation, and the criminals are apprehended. I found myself reading this story with mounting interest, really waiting to see how it would end.

Although the story was not a school assignment, I submitted it to a seventh-grade teacher, name now forgotten, who wrote in red ink in a spidery hand at the top of the first page: "Interesting. B." After that I put the little handwritten manuscript away and went back to writing school papers.

The old carton I found also contained my second piece of fiction, written several years later as a freshman in college and after a successful stint on the high school newspaper. This story was called "Mid-Summer," and it detailed the life of a poverty-stricken woman living in the slums who barely earned enough as a seamstress to feed herself and her children. (The children were, of course, sickly.) For some reason she was always sewing on black material with black thread, and there was a continuous and intense heat wave. I think the story was meant to create such a compelling mood that the reader would forever after sympathize with the plight of the poor. I found myself reading this story with increasing embarrassment, wondering if it would ever end.

On the first page of this story was written in a bold hand the comment: "You should try to write about things that you know firsthand. Keep writing. See me." This unwelcome criticism was written by my freshman English instructor, Mr. Bailey, who is still vividly, although not always fondly, remembered by me.

Well, I never made it as a fiction writer, although I once had a short story published in a college magazine. When I reread my seventh-grade story it did strike me as genuinely interesting, and it did indeed deal with something I knew firsthand—my own active teenage fantasy life, stimulated by being on the fringes of the mysterious adult world.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened to me as a writer if those two teachers had been interchanged. ●

KATHARINE ERICSON has a varied professional background including magazine editing, guidance work, and academic administration. Until recently she was director of Radcliffe Career Services at Harvard University. She now does writing and consulting in the field of continuing education and career development. She is the author of *The Solar Jobs Book*. Andover: Brick House Publishing Co., 1980.

Learning about Learning

by Molly Watt

IN JULY 1968, I WAS PRIVILEGED to be a participant in a summer workshop led by Roy Illsley.* The workshop was designed to acquaint teachers with the British Infant School model of an integrated day. Roy Illsley shared with us the thesis that every person in a classroom, *including the teacher*, should be involved in some learning at their own level. While this idea astounded me, it simultaneously seemed perfectly obvious. I spent a good part of the next year attempting to discover what form of expressive learning I could include in my daily routine while continuing to meet the needs of my K-1-2 class.

I started with journal writing during the class's journal time. Due to frequent interruptions, at the end of the first month I found that I had written little more than one page. Next I tried reading an adult book during the quiet reading sessions. I never succeeded in finishing one chapter. Then I brought a weaving project from my home which, during my intermittent errands, was woven on by smaller hands with different rhythms from my own. Eventually I abandoned my attempts to grace the class with myself as "model learner." I was no longer willing to live with the tensions I experienced balancing between Roy Illsley's goal and my role as classroom teacher. And yet I continued to ponder.

Some years later I realized that I *was* indeed involved in daily learning at my own level. My learning took the form of observing the children's learning and analyzing the meaning of their work. I began to formalize my work with descriptive jottings in my notebook, with my camera, and with a tape recorder. Each year I would choose a particular focus for myself.

One year I gave special attention to the conversations I had with children. These were "formal" events in the sense that I invited children to participate; we talked about *one* subject, often in a special room; everyone stayed for the complete time. I asked the children for permission to write down their exact words or to tape-record the sessions. We talked about many subjects — hurt feelings, new babies, making mistakes, what is hard, what is easy, what is a friend, and favorite pets.

One of the subjects that seemed especially interesting to the children was "How I Learned to..." These sessions became story tellings in which the children shared their own remembrances about how they had learned to ski, swim, read, and ride a bike. Each memory was particular and yet simultaneously universal. Each story made the teller more visible to the others as a human being and the process of learning more understandable as a *process*. The effect of these conversations seemed to ripple through the classroom. Children would encourage each other in their learning by saying, "It takes time, you'll get it" or "We don't all learn the same way, you know" or "Last year I couldn't read at all, and all of a sudden I could read the job list; you'll do it too." As children continued to share descriptions of their own learning, they seemed to become more comfortable with the many ways that learning happens and more patient with themselves.

I shared some transcriptions of these conversations with my Children's Thinking Seminar and found that my colleagues were as excited as I was that the children's learning processes could be made visible by their own described memories. One teacher wondered whether it would be possible to use the children's own words to create little books for them to read. I tucked the thought away.

Some months later my class made several books for our classroom library. I made minor changes in the children's wording including shifting perspective from first person to third person. The children helped with the lettering, illustrations, and bindings, and then they learned to read the books to each other.

One of the books. *Learning to Ride a Bike* by Gina, Penny, Tess, and Ned, is reproduced below:

CHAPTER ONE

Gina learned to ride a bike because her brothers all learned to do it first. Her daddy would hold onto the seat, and she would pedal. Sometimes he would let go of the seat without telling her. She would think he was holding on, and she wouldn't fall down. He would really be running way behind. It was easy for her because every time he let go, she thought he was still holding on. She was in kindergarten.

CHAPTER TWO

Penny learned to ride a bike after visiting her friend Daniel. He had taken his training wheels off. So she said, "Daddy, Daddy, can I take my training wheels off?" They took them off and her father helped her go around in circles and stuff like that. It was hard. It took her five days!

CHAPTER THREE

Tess learned to ride a bike without training wheels or nothing. She brought her purple bike to the park bench and stepped on the bench and sat on the bike. She started pushing herself off on her bike and she pedalled. She can always do it now, and her bike is a big one!

CHAPTER FOUR

Ned is still learning to ride a bike. His sister can ride one. He doesn't really know how yet, and he doesn't know how he is going to learn. When he goes to the park, he practices steering straight. He can't balance when he steers. He can't steer when he balances. He thinks he'll be able to ride a bike next year.

The children enjoyed rereading these books. They used the books for learning to read and for reading about learning. The books were starting points for an informal sharing between children. And other children asked to dictate their own stories about learning, which we subsequently bound into books.

I had come full circle. I was the "model learner" that Roy Illsley had suggested each teacher become. I had followed my own interests, and my students were learning about learning with me. ●

MOLLY WATT has taught three- to nine-year-olds for eighteen years, raised two daughters, and filled more than twenty personal journals. She is currently writing a book about one particularly difficult and rich year of public school teaching.

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*Roy Illsley was the head of a school in Leicestershire, England. He conducted several workshops in the United States, in the sixties, to help teachers learn how to run informal classes.

Playwriting in High School

A detailed account of how a playwriting course was developed.

by Nancy Fales Garrett

FOR SIX YEARS I TAUGHT A playwriting class to high school students at St. Ann's Episcopal School[1]. The plays that came out of the class were of high quality. Several of them won prizes in the Thacher School Playwriting Contest. More importantly perhaps, many of the students left the class obviously more psychologically integrated than when they had entered it. They had learned not only how to write a play—no mean feat in itself — but also something about the nature and power of creativity. By creating good guys and bad guys from the welter of characters in their own imaginative lives and by creating them from the respective points of view the characters represented (for the playwright must write every character from that character's point of view), they had developed a little of the "negative capability" Keats identifies as being the hallmark of genius in literature. Almost all my students have continued to write. I have tried to analyze what made the class so successful, and whether the techniques that worked for me would work for other teachers as well — whether, in fact, the experiment is replicable. I think it is.

As do many good things, the class sprouted by accident and blossomed with no formal encouragement. Laura Elwyn, who wrote *Aspera and Angelique*, was my first student. She was a

[1]St. Ann's Episcopal School is a twelve-year college preparatory, independent school located in Brooklyn Heights, New York. Teachers at St. Ann's are allowed and encouraged to design their own courses, although these must fall within the fairly broad compass of the curriculum. Since its inception, the school has had a commitment to educate the gifted and has made an effort to attract gifted students not only from the wealthy Brooklyn Heights professionals who are its principal supporters but also from among the poor. One out of every five students at St. Ann's attends on a scholarship.

NANCY FALES GARRETT has been teaching in the English and theater departments at St. Ann's. Her own plays have been produced at La Mama E.T.C., Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence, and Bennington. She was awarded a CAPS grant in 1976 and an NEA fellowship in 1979.

member of an elective English course called "The Pursuit of Happiness." The reading list for the course included the classical accounts of this pursuit, *Rasselas* and *Pilgrim's Progress*, and such modern ones as Kerouac's *On The Road* and Bellow's *Henderson, The Rain King*. It was in the early seventies, and the lives of many of the students had been seared by an exposure to "recreational drugs." Getting high and staying there was their principal occupation. Their goals were utopian ones, and convinced that their doors of perception had been opened, they burned out their synaptic responses with an innocence and beatitude that bordered on lunacy. "The Pursuit of Happiness" was an attempt to give them a sense of other methods and approaches that had been tried in man's doomed and inevitable search for the key to that gate that is presided over by the angel with the flaming sword.

Laura did not often contribute to the class discussions, but I had the feeling that she had thought about the subjects that other students dismissed with glib platitudes. One day, after a particularly opinionated and, I thought, off-target discussion about the ways in which people can influence and enslave each other, Laura came up to me after class and told me that she wanted to write a play. I agreed to read what she wrote and to offer suggestions. We began meeting once a week at lunchtime.

Laura was a very shy girl with a voice that never rose above a whisper. She appeared to make an effort to be conscious of the passions and complexity of her emotional life. She was not interested in me as a confidante, however, but as someone with whom she could discuss her characters and their emotions. (I never discuss with the writers their relationship to their characters or their resemblance to themselves or to people they may know in real life. Although it is obvious that on a certain level no one ever writes fiction but only brings forth a variously glittering and eclectic mosaic of bits of self, every writer deserves the courtesy of his or her work being considered in terms of its literary—or, in our case, theatrical—merits. This is particularly true with younger writers whose need to handle intimate psychological material may be offset by a fear of revealing themselves.)

Laura usually got to the cafeteria first. At a table in the back of the room I would find her, eyes downcast, a curtain of ash-colored hair hiding her pale face with its wonderfully intimate elfin smile, a cup of light coffee before her. I would sit down, order my own coffee, and then Laura would hand me the spiral notebook in which she wrote *Aspera and Angelique.*

At first, I was not at all clear about the matter of the play. Aspera and Angelique were, or had been, lovers, but the essence of their relationship was not sexual but psychological. Yet it was difficult for me to pinpoint the salient characteristics of either woman. Laura had a sense of them, apparently, but they were like figures in a dream, all presence and no outline.

Because of this, the dialogue that she wrote seemed to me to have been randomly assigned. I could never guess which woman was speaking, and I kept getting their names confused. "Which woman is the stronger?" I asked, but Laura could not answer that question simply. She might have understood the balance of power, but it was a long time before she was able to explain it. At last one day she said, "Aspera likes to dominate people, but Angelique likes to make people dominate her."

Although she knew that this was a simplification of the characters' relationship, it was important for Laura to be able to make this statement. Until she could do so, she was unable to keep her material in focus. Too often, the dialogue had been illustrative of nothing at all, merely an exchange of barbed remarks between ex-roommates. Now it achieved a bitter and acidulous logic.

Some days Laura wrote two or three pages, some days only a line, and some days, these were often the best, she subtracted material, crossing out the stuff that didn't make sense. Laura would stare intently at the clouded surface of her coffee while I read the dialogue, usually written in pencil and full of cross-hatchings and additional phrases in tiny handwriting which marched across the paper at all angles and filled in the margins and the spaces between the lines. I read carefully, challenging everything. Together we pondered every reaction. "Why would she say this?" I might ask or "Why does she feel this way?" or "How could she show her resentment more clearly?"

My questions focussed on the balance of power between Aspera and Angelique. Their relationship was interesting enough and complex enough for the plot to emerge from their feelings rather than be a story imposed upon them from the outside. The plot was simply the journey from the surface to the core of their relationship, a journey down the dark tunnel of dependency and fear to the airless cave where they had once lived together. Aspera had left that cave, but Angelique still "sat in her hole" and suffered the entropy of her conflicting impulses.

The task of writing the play was to shatter the manners and conventions that kept the two women on the surface. Laura plunged into the hearts and minds of her characters. As all writers must, she walked that lonesome valley by herself. My role was only to encourage her and to point out to her when the dialogue strayed from the path or failed to take us deeper. Once she had an idea of where she was going, Laura rarely strayed. The play grew very smoothly. Only occasionally did I have to ask, "Why did she say or do that now? I don't understand. So what?" At the end of every meeting we discussed what could happen next, although when Laura brought in what she had written, it often turned out that something other than what we had discussed had happened. Characters, she discovered, go their own way.

One day in the spring I entered the cafeteria, took Laura's notebook, and found that she had written:

> Angelique takes the bottle from under the cover and hurls it at Aspera, who ducks to one side. The bottle smashes on the floor. Angelique gets out of bed. She is half laughing, half sobbing. She goes over to where the bottle has smashed. The floor is covered with liquid. She gets down on her hands and knees and puts her face to the floor.
>
> *Aspera*: Angie, what is that?
>
> *Angelique:* Alcohol. Rubbing alcohol.
>
> Aspera stares for a second. Angelique begins to lap the liquid from the floor. Aspera gets up, goes over to Angelique, and puts her arms around her waist, trying to pull her from the floor. They struggle there, Aspera unable to pull her away, but Angelique unable to get her head close enough to the floor. The lights

dim, go out.

It was quite an achievement: Laura had written a twenty-one-page one-act play in which the characters progressed from a friendly bantering to a life-and-death struggle. Although neither character had really changed, our perception of both of them had changed. Angelique no longer seemed merely passive, but involved in a desperate, damned effort to destroy herself and to implicate Aspera in that destruction, in fact, to blame it upon her. Aspera no longer seemed a strong, kind woman who was patient with her friend and supportive of her in a difficult period, but a victim of her own love of control which made her an unwilling collaborator in a dance of death.

The ending, I knew, was not quite right. The frustration the characters experienced in the impasse of their relationship was probably not the strongest resolution of their conflict. And, since rubbing alcohol doesn't come in glass bottles and plastic bottles don't shatter, it wouldn't play. Nevertheless, it was time to stop talking and start treating the play as a play, that is to say, as an actual rather than a theoretical inquiry into behavior.

I was living then in an unconverted loft in a factory building on the edge of Soho. The loft was divided into working and living areas, and the working area, which was set up to do plays and theater pieces, contained a bleachers. I thought we could put on *Aspera and Angelique* there and invite an audience.

Laura cast two fine young actresses from St. Ann's: Naomi Miller as Aspera and Sonia Nachuk as Angelique. Several afternoons a week the three young women came over to Manhattan to rehearse. We began by reading the play through. Each of the actresses discussed her first understanding of her character, what she thought the character's basic qualities were, any immediate impressions she had formed of how the character might dress. Sonia thought Angelique should be messy. Naomi thought Aspera should wear hiking boots and a flannel shirt. Together we set up the stage area: a bed, a desk, a chair, a table, a door, a window. We determined to add other props as we discovered the need for them. Then, beginning at the beginning of the play, so that each moment would open out of the one which preceded it, we constructed a physical metaphor for the action, that is to say, the shifts in the balance of power.

When we got to the end of the play, we ran into the problems I had anticipated. The gesture in which Angelique lapped the rubbing alcohol from the floor while Aspera tried to pull her away was comic. It was not a plausible gesture of self-destruction. We began to cast about for another ending. The women had been drinking vodka, which, taken in large enough quantities, can be as lethal as rubbing alcohol. I had the actresses improvise the scene and insisted that Sonia drink nearly a whole quart of water.

"It takes a long time to drink that much water," Sonia insisted. "Don't fill it all the way up."

"That's the point," I said. "When you decide to drink it, drink it as fast as you can. Drink it to end the agony of being conscious."

When Laura saw what happened when Angelique broke through her inertia and took the ultimate step toward ending the relationship, she decided to have Aspera change also. Up until the end of the play, Aspera had responded to every self-destructive gesture that Angelique made by increasing her own bland accepting tolerance, but when Angelique crossed the line that separated threat from action, when she put herself in physical as opposed to psychological jeopardy, Aspera's tolerance evaporated and she stormed out of the room. Angelique had paid a terrible price, but she had finally succeeded in dissolving the relationship.

Although we had planned to present *Aspera and Angelique* to a small audience of relatives and friends, when I realized how powerful the play had become, I went to Stanley Bosworth, the headmaster of St. Ann's, and asked permission to present it to the entire high school. I explained to him that the subject matter of the play was controversial. He was not put off by that. He felt, as I did, that Laura's play deserved to be seen and discussed by the largest possible audience. (You cannot be shy of controversy if you are working with writers who write about what they see and know.)

Don and Ikuyo Garber, the directors of the technical theater program, offered to have their stage crew build Laura a set consisting of three flats, including a door flat and a window flat. It was not fancy, but it reinforced the young women's sense of the theatrical legitimacy of the project. Inspired by the Garbers' energy and enthusiasm, kids appeared to run the sound and the lights. We rehearsed a few times on the new set, put up a few posters, and, on a spring night in 1974, *Aspera and Angelique* premiered.

It sent shock waves of surprise and recognition through the high school. It sent shock waves through the parents and teachers too. Everyone recognized that Laura had written a work of stunning psychological and theatrical intelligence. Naomi's and Sonia's performances were clear, unsentimental, and very powerful. In short, it was a hit, a palpable hit.

Laura has not gone on to write other plays. She is now an intensely political young woman who devotes her life to social change. The anomie that haunted her characters has no place in her own life. *Aspera and Angelique* was a quintessential juice pressed from the lives of women who feared action. Perhaps someday Laura will press a similar juice from the lives of political figures who fear introspection. She has a remarkable talent, and I have used the experience of working with her, and with Naomi and Sonia, as a paradigm on which to build a course in writing and directing one-act plays. But perhaps Laura has said goodbye to all that.

The success of *Aspera and Angelique* created a demand for a course in playwriting. Although I did not know whether the way I had worked with Laura could be duplicated in a classroom or whether I could work with several writers simultaneously, I agreed to try. To my surprise, the students began writing, producing, and directing plays of considerable merit. Several exceptional talents emerged. Even the less-gifted writers turned out competent plays, while students who had had no experience of academic success wrote and directed plays which were admired and discussed by their classmates.

It may be that, as swimming is said to be most easily taught to young babies, teenagers are natural playwrights. They are full of conflicts and questions; they are moving from the egocentricity of childhood to the broader outlook of the adult. At the same time, they are busy staking out their various grounds of being and defending them against all comers.

These two mental tendencies are opposed. (It is difficult to be tolerant of other people when one is fighting for one's own rights.) They come to a head in the emerging personality just when the lures of the street, the availability of drugs, and the anxieties attendant upon becoming citizens of a world that is running out of options, energy, and food become inescapable realities. Not surprisingly, the teenager welcomes the opportunity to develop the capability of "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."[2]

This power to abide in contradictions, to perceive the paradox at the heart of all things, to entertain mutually exclusive viewpoints simultaneously is the playwright's stock in trade. In order to create them according to the logic of their various consciousnesses, the playwright must be able to fathom the hearts and minds of all his characters — no matter how contrary their ideas are to his own. He must develop negative capability. It is not the business of the playwright to judge his characters. The theater itself does that. In the theater we can see the karmic equation, "As ye sow, so shall ye reap," demonstrated more clearly than we see it in life. We can see the consequences of the characters' actions. The business of the playwright is to make those consequences both inevitable and unexpected. It is not judgment the playwright should be concerned with, but understanding.

One of the challenges of dealing with teenage writers is that many of them initially confuse affect with action. They carry around mental checklists of what's "intense" or "hip" or "slick" or what's "toy" or "lame" or "nerdy." They *like* attitudes (as long as someone isn't running one on them), and, of course, for so the world turns, they have a tendency to admire behavior that their elders regard as antisocial, violent, ecstatic, rebellious, vulgar, and ridiculous. George Bernard Shaw had the same tendency, but he understood that the woman with the ugly hat or unacceptable ideas may *do* much good. Teenagers have to be led to the awareness that a character who represents a point of view they admire may do harm or one who espouses ideas they find reprehensible may per-

[2]John Keats, from a letter to his brother dated December 21, 1817

form valiant actions. It is what a character does that is important, not what he thinks or whom he loves or how he dresses, although all of these conditions may influence the way he acts. "The supreme good itself," said Aristotle, "the very end of life, is action of a certain kind—not quality."[3] "By their fruits ye shall know them," said Jesus.

I wanted each of my students to have the sort of experience that Laura had had, and so I decided that the objective ofthe playwriting course would be for each student to write and direct his own one-act play. Although the class membership now hovers around thirty, that has remained the objective. At the end of the school year we put on a festival of these plays. When there are too many to give each one a full production, I select the five or six plays I think the most deserving of this honor, and the rest are given staged or unstaged readings. I make sure that every play is given some presentation before an audience. The playwright cannot gauge the effectiveness of his work without being able to observe the audience's response to it.

Having said what the objective of the course is, I must take a moment to say what it is not. A course in playwriting is not a course in writing. A playwright, like a shipwright, or a millwright, is a maker, although he does not work in wood but in action and language. The language is the spoken, not the written language. A successful teacher of playwriting must abandon his attachment to improving the language skills of his students. His students may well emerge as dynamic and subtle writers able to turn on a dime and to make a mountain out of a molehill, but unless they come into the course already writing standard English, they will not leave doing so, for the student playwright will almost certainly not create characters whose education exceeds his own. Take comfort. A playwright must listen hard, must inevitably fall in love with language, and, eventually, when he perceives the need, will, with little trouble, acquire the techniques of formal writing. Resist the temptation to include them in this course.

It is also important to remember that a course in playwriting is not a course in mental health. The objective of the course is to produce good one-act plays; it is not to restructure the students' personalities. This occasionally occurs as students rethink certain attitudes and behaviors, or as they come to a clearer understanding of the other. Although I have advertised increased understanding as a side effect, and although I believe it to be an inevitable one, I also believe that it can occur only if the teacher pays no attention to it. The job of the playwriting teacher is to get the students to write clear plays. It is not to bring them to whatever it is that the teacher thinks constitutes mental health.

One of the most interesting plays in the history of the class was written by Linda,[4] a beautiful and highly intelligent young woman, who when she joined did not have many close friends. There were few people interested in providing the constant admiration her narcissistic nature demanded. Linda pretended to take pleasure in being "obnoxious" to people who did not come up to her critical standards for the human race.

By the third or fourth week of the class — it takes some students much longer—Linda had begun her play. It was about a love affair between two young adults. Although I suspected that this might have some resemblance to what was obviously an obsessive relationship in her own life, I did not let on. I never determined whether the other students recognized the similarities in behavior between Linda and her heroine, Ginny, or if the fact that the lovers in the play were college students threw them off the track. If they did recognize the similarities, they were extremely tactful. They honored the unspoken ground rule of the class which prohibited commenting on anyone's personal life. "The playwright must be able to treat real life as fiction," I had told them repeatedly. Perhaps they recognized the similarities and took them for granted.

The early material from the play was very undramatic. The man's role was limited to admiring the various outrageous poses and attitudes of the woman. Although the woman's behavior was thoroughly mean spirited and self-absorbed and although the man showed no more personality than a bar of soap, Linda clearly expected the audience to admire both her lovers (particularly Ginny) and to root for the success of their love affair. But it wasn't a love affair; neither character had a true perception of the other.

"Why is Chris with Ginny?" other playwrights asked Linda. "She's so mean to him. What's in it for him?"

"She's beautiful. She's intelligent," Linda would answer.

"So what? She's horrible to him."

This was obviously a new thought for Linda. Consciously or unconsciously, she had patterned Ginny's behavior after her own, and she was surprised to discover that no one found it laudable. Her own admiration for her heroine wavered, then died completely. She began to develop Chris. Unlike Ginny, whose narcissistic defenses prohibited her from receiving or extending friendship or love, Chris wanted to love and be loved. He demanded it, and when Ginny could not meet him halfway, he left her. *The Shell Game* was a very good play.

By the end of the year, I could not help noticing that Linda's own behavior had changed radically. She was now polite and affectionate to everyone she met; she had divested herself of the parasitic attentions of her former boyfriend; and she had begun to develop some real friendships with other students who, no longer intimidated by her "obnoxious" manner, sought out the lively and perceptive mind of the author of a play they admired greatly.

Linda and I had limited our conversations to the business of the class, but one afternoon in the last week of school, we happened to be walking side by side down the stairs that lead from the thirteenth floor to the lobby.

"You know," she said to me, "I used to have some of those attitudes Ginny had in the play."

"I know," I said.

"I used to do some of those things, but I don't do them any more."

"I know."

She threw her arms around me. "Thank you."

"I didn't do anything," I said truthfully. "You did it all. You wrote a first-rate play. And you learned from yourself."

The play demanded it happen. It happened because Linda felt secure in the impersonal nonjudgmental nature of the class to draw from herself first the disagreeable surface habits she

[3]*The Poetics*, Book 2: Chapter 3.

[4]not her real name.

molded into the character of Ginny, and then the strong and loving, and much simpler, traits of which she composed Chris. It happened because Linda was able to recognize the emblematic nature of her play and, in an act of intellectual and spiritual strength, to alter her own behavior accordingly. It would never have happened if I had tried to lead her. To have involved myself with her personal life or her psychology would have violated her privacy. And it was not necessary. The process of writing and directing a play is itself therapeutic; the teacher need only insure that nothing—including his or her own attitudes—interfere with the process.

Each September when I face a classroom full of aspiring writers, I wonder, and I see them wondering, whether the miracle will recur, whether this crop of playwrights will be able to take the stuff of their daydreams and experiences and turn it into the stuff of theater. Laura and Linda knew what they wanted to write about, but most of my students have not known. In order to bring them to the place where they are bursting with characters they need to deliver, I have devised the following approach.

I begin the first class with a discussion of the classical unities: *unity of time, unity of place,* and *unity of action.* Although these strictures have been out of fashion for about three hundred years, they are still effective guidelines for the creation of a one-act play. Unity of time I interpret to mean, not, as it was originally defined, that the action take place within the compass of twenty-four hours, but that it is continuous, coincident with stage time, and not interrupted by scene changes. Unity of place means that the action takes place in one location. (Unfortunately, some stubborn students write twenty-minute plays in twelve scenes with the scene changes significantly longer than the scenes they separate, but I make sure that they understand that the more technically difficult the plays are to produce, the less likely they are of being selected for production.) Unity of action means that there is a central action in the play and that no material is included which is not relevant to the central action. David Mamet explained this in a recent article in the New York Times:

> If the action of a character in one scene, for example, is to flee the country, we know that a good way for him to start would be by having him leave the room. But most of us are loath to eliminate the moving "Death of My Kitten" speech the hero utters on his exit.
>
> The necessary progression is:
> TANIA: Franz, the Army of the Reds is in the Village Square, and you must leave.
> FRANZ: See you in Bucharest. (He exits.)
>
> But we lie to ourselves, hoping that no one will notice the interruption of the action, and the scene is written:
> TANIA: Franz, the Army of the Reds is in the Village Square, and you must leave.
> FRANZ: Leave? Leave? How *many* ways are there to leave! When I was young I had a kitten.... [5]

If one is to observe the unity of action, one must eliminate the death-of-the-kitten speech. It is not relevant to the central action of the scene.

I suggest that students keep a notebook for material they particularly like but which has nothing to do with the scene or the play they are writing. "Don't waste good stuff by sticking it where it doesn't belong," I tell them. "Save it. It might come in handy in another play. It might be the beginning of another play."

On our second meeting, I bring a stopwatch to class, and suddenly, for no reason at all, I slam a book or a shoe on the desk and simultaneously start the stopwatch. I continue the class as though nothing had happened. At the end of a minute I stop the watch and say to the students, "It is now exactly a minute since I slammed the book upon the desk. Write down everything that has been said or done since that time."

This is fun to do, and it serves many purposes: the students are already writing dialogue, and they are getting a sense of how much can happen in a minute. They also learn the importance of listening. Some students catch the dialogue nearly word for word. Some have only a hazy idea of the actual words. I have the students read and compare observations. Depending on the number of students and the level of attention, I might have them get together to try to recreate the moment exactly, and I might discuss why certain phrases or actions seem to be more memorable than others.

[5] *N.Y. Times*, Arts and Leisure, July 20, 1980.

The first homework assignment I call EXERCISE ONE:

Overhear a conversation of approximately a minute's length, write it down, and bring it to the next class. (Do not use a tape recorder. This is an exercise in listening.)

In the third class, the students read their overheard conversations. I tell them not to identify the speakers in order to let the other students guess who was talking. This gives them an idea of how much we reveal in ordinary conversation. From a snatch of dialogue which may contain no information, the students can almost always guess the relationship of the speakers.

Some of the conversations are interesting, lively, funny. (I remember one student who reported on two young men sitting on a stoop and watching all the girls go by. "Hey, sister," said one of the young men, "I take some fries with that shake!") Some of the conversations, although they may be accurate, are pretty dull. I have noticed that it is frequently the students who turn out to be the most talented who overhear the most interesting conversations.

At any rate, I insist that the students treat these overheard conversations as accidents. Before any of them are read, I explain that we will likely discover some that are interesting and some that are not. No praise, no blame. They are all overheard. If a student reads a conversation that has little dramatic possibility or felicity of expression, I use it as a way of introducing *dramatic irony*.

Dramatic irony occurs when the actions of the characters and their words are in sharp or ironic contrast—as, for instance, if the characters are beheading chickens while discussing the relative merits of deodorants or psychiatrists.

We take the boring conversation and figure out what could be happening on stage that would make the exchange interesting. For instance:

> How are you?
> Just fine and yourself?
> Not too bad.
> Good. How's the family?
> Everybody's fine.
> I'm glad to hear that.

How's your family?

They're all doing real well.

Isn't that nice. . . .etc.

would be an interesting or preposterous conversation if it occurred between a felon and an arresting officer.

In the first few sessions of the class, I talk a lot about Aristotle, but I do not usually assign *The Poetics* until the students have begun writing their own plays and can consequently use Aristotle's lecture notes as a handbook. Whenever or however you assign Aristotle, it is important to stress, as he does, that plays are about action. Sometimes, as in *The Cherry Orchard* or *Waiting for Godot*, they are about action that doesn't happen. Godot does not appear, Madame Ranevskaya does not really try to save her beloved orchard. Dramatic action is not the same as physical action. *Dramatic action occurs when characters experience change in their mental, emotional, or spiritual makeups, or when they change in their relationships with each other, or when they change in relationship to their environment.*

Many beginning playwrights, often ones who have been successful in other creative writing courses, and who have, or fancy they have, a special talent in this regard, resist the idea of dramatic action. They are so enthralled by the act of committing words to paper that they forget that it is only an intermediate step. A play is like a musical score. It exists to be played. It cannot be played unless there is something for the performers to DO.

I have found the following exercises useful in establishing this point.

EXERCISE TWO: Write a scene in which something happens on stage, but no words are spoken. Make these scenes as subtle as possible. Don't choose a murder.

EXERCISE THREE: Write a scene in which nothing happens on stage, but many words are spoken. These scenes may turn out to be quite funny. The students may be wrong. Quite a lot might be happening. What might be happening is that the audience's expectations of something happening are not being met. A scene in which nothing happens is a scene in which the audience expects nothing to happen and is right. Nothing happens. It is very boring. It is also surprisingly difficult to do on purpose — like trying not to think about a monkey.

These first three exercises are designed with the aim of getting the students to write without realizing that they are writing, without their setting up any expectations for themselves. Before you assign a scene that taps the students' own resources, you have already given them practice recording dialogue, creating action, and maintaining a certain distance from their work. The transition from these first exercises to the more demanding exercises from which the plays emerge will probably go unnoticed by the class.

The following writing assignments are all descriptions of dramatic action; they all require that the characters change from one emotion or idea to another, or change in relationship to each other, or both. Many contemporary playwrights and teachers of playwriting appear to be laboring under the misconception that plays demand conflict. No doubt this accounts for the quarrelsome, disagreeable tone of much modern theater. Dramatic action demands CHANGE, not conflict. It is true that change is often produced by conflict, but it is not true that all conflict produces change. Both in life and in art many conflicts never resolve and, although passionate, are static exchanges. The most interesting part of a disagreement should be its resolution, but too often characters call each other names for a while and then walk off, hand in hand, essentially unchanged.

Assigning change guarantees that, if the exercise is correctly done, whether or not the writing itself is imaginative or inspired, the scene will be dynamic.

These exercises, or others constructed on this simple principle, very frequently result in good writing, for they direct the student's attention to the movement of consciousness. Everyone has had the experience of moving from one emotion to another or from one idea to another. The experience is not difficult to recreate. Something in our deepest natures responds passionately to imitations of "the logic of consciousness."

These exercises may be assigned in any order and repeated as often as you like. The scenes should be at least three minutes in length.

EXERCISE FOUR: Write a scene in which someone moves from affection to anger.

EXERCISE FIVE: Write a scene in which someone moves from anger to affection.

EXERCISE SIX: Write a scene in which someone discovers something unpleasant.

EXERCISE SEVEN: Write a scene in which someone lies.

EXERCISE EIGHT: Write a scene in which the protagonists switch sides, i.e., A ends up asserting B's original argument and vice versa.

EXERCISE NINE: Write a scene in which someone changes his mind.

EXERCISE TEN: Write a scene in which two people from different generations disagree.

EXERCISE ELEVEN: Write a scene which centers around food. That does not mean a scene which takes place at mealtime, but one in which the interaction occurs not only between the characters but also between the characters and the food. The food is a character in the scene.

EXERCISE TWELVE: Write a scene in which two people who hold the same opinions about something disagree.

EXERCISE THIRTEEN: Write a scene in which two people who are in fundamental disagreement agree about something.

EXERCISE FOURTEEN: Write a scene about a misunderstanding.

EXERCISE FIFTEEN: Write a scene in which someone recognizes someone else.

EXERCISE SIXTEEN: Write a scene in which someone's authority is undermined.

EXERCISE SEVENTEEN: Write a scene in which someone's self-image is shattered.

EXERCISE EIGHTEEN: Write a scene in which someone who has had very little self-confidence comes to feel good about himself.

EXERCISE NINETEEN: Write a scene in which someone expects something to happen and something else happens instead.

EXERCISE TWENTY: Write a scene in which people resort to trivial arguments instead of dealing directly with their basic differences.

This list can be expanded indefinitely, but by the time a student has written four or five of these short scenes, he will probably have written a character he thinks worthy of developing further. Whenever this happens, he is ready to begin writing his play. He has, in fact, begun writing his play. ●

Aspera and Angelique
A play

by Laura J. Elwyn

CHARACTERS

ANGELIQUE is in her late teens or early twenties. She is of average height and build with dark blond hair and fair skin. She is pretty, but not especially so. She is barefoot and wears jeans.

ASPERA is around the same age as ANGELIQUE, possibly a little older. She is of the same physical type and, again, not fantastically beautiful. However, she has more presence or charisma than ANGELIQUE; her eyes are clearer and her features, more unique. She wears jeans, boots, and a macrame belt.

The play takes place in Angelique's bedroom on a spring night in New York City. There is a large double bed, a desk covered with papers and books, a chair, a bureau, and a window with thick curtains which are open. The room is messy: empty beer cans and whiskey bottles, piles of dirty clothes, full ashtrays, etc. As the play begins, we hear "Guilty" by Randy Newman, sung by Bonnie Raitt

Yes, Baby, I been drinking
Shouldn't come by, I know
But I found myself in trouble, darlin'
And I had no place else to go.

I got some whiskey from a barroom
Got some cocaine from a friend
And I had to keep on movin', Baby,
'Til I was back in your arms again.

Well, I'm guilty, Honey, I'm guilty
And I'll be guilty all the rest of my life
How come I never do what I'm supposed to do
Nothing I try to do ever turns out right.

You know how it is with me, Baby

LAURA J. ELWYN was born on October 10, 1956. She grew up in Chicago and New York City and on a New Hampshire farm. Her play was written seven years ago and is in part about the inability to act on understanding. She has been much affected by the poverty she has observed, and she now feels writing is not enough: it must be coupled to action.

You know I just can't stand myself
It takes a whole lot of medicine, Darlin'
For me to pretend that I'm somebody else.

Angelique is alone on the bed. The music fades, there is the sound, offstage, of the front door being opened and then closed. Angelique sits up, puts down her book.

Angelique: Aspera?
(The door to her room opens, Aspera enters, smiles, goes over to Angelique and kisses her. Angie smiles and tries to draw Aspera down on top of her. Aspera gently withdraws to the other side of the bed and removes her boots.)
Aspera: How are you?
Angelique: Sleepy. Do you know what time it is?
Aspera: It's about ten-thirty or eleven. You still don't have a clock in this room?
Angelique: I don't like them. They make me feel like I'm supposed to be doing something.
Aspera: How do you get to work on time?
Angelique: I don't.
Smiling at her.
Not since you abandoned me.
Aspera: Honey, I couldn't abandon you.
Pause.
Angelique: You know, I've been thinking, we live in such a small world. I mean, not in the sense that the world is small. But like what we see of the world, what we know, isn't very much.
Aspera: We see more than an awful lot of people.
Angelique: Yeah. That's true, maybe. But we know that.
Aspera: You mean, we're aware of more?
Angelique: Yeah. And also, we have more control over our lives.
Aspera: Mmhm.
Angelique: I don't know. It doesn't matter. How's job hunting?
Aspera: Unfruitful.
Angelique: Are you running out of money?
Aspera: No, not really. It should last me awhile. You know, I saved most of that money, when we were together. I don't see how I did it.
Angelique: Why? I don't spend much money.
Aspera: You have this decadent influence on me.
They both laugh. Pause.
Angelique: You want a drink?
Smiling.
Well, don't look at me like that. I only asked you.
She gets up, leaves the room. Aspera picks up the book Angelique was reading, then puts it down. She goes over to the desk, leafs through the papers, begins to read. Angelique comes back with two glasses and a bottle of gin or vodka, which she puts on the desk.
Don't read that.
She pours out a drink and hands it to Aspera.
Here.
She pours out another drink and begins to pick up the papers and pile them together on the back of the desk. Aspera watches her.
Aspera: Why don't you ever let me read your stuff?
Angelique: It's not very good.
She picks up her drink hurriedly, spills a little of it, swears, goes back to the bed, and, still not looking at Aspera, lights a cigarette. Aspera watches her curiously, goes over to the bed, and sits down beside her friend.
Aspera: Honey, what do you write about?
Angelique: Nothing in particular.
Aspera: Will you let me read the story you're working on?
Angelique: Maybe. When it's finished.
Aspera: You'll rip it up, right?
Angelique: I don't usually rip them up.
Aspera: If I read it?
Angelique: I don't know, Aspera, it doesn't matter.
Aspera: All right, Honey. I'll stop. I was just teasing you.
Pause.
How's work?
Angelique: It's OK.
Hesitating.
It's OK. But, oh Jesus, Aspera. I don't know. It makes me so tired just to think of it.
Aspera: Yeah, I know. I wish I didn't have to get a job.
Angelique: But, you know, I wouldn't mind the having to get up in the morning, I wouldn't mind never having any time, if I were getting somewhere.
Aspera: Well, you could, you know.
Angelique: But it's more than that, too. I mean, I'm not alone very much, and I want to be alone. But when I am alone, I can't stand it.
Aspera: Do you mean...
Angelique: Everything's wrong. I do things because I have to. There's no more reason than that.
Aspera: There's no reason for anything, except what you put into it.
Angelique: Exactly.
Aspera: You know, Angie, you're scared of consequences. Not that you're scared of responsibilities for *what* you do, but for yourself.
Angelique: Yeah, maybe. But I never know if my reasons are wrong, do you see what I mean?
Aspera: Yeah. You're scared of your effect, of the consequences of your actions.
Angelique: But I should be.
Aspera: But you can't be.
Pause.
You're too subjective and too...
Angelique: I know that.
Aspera: No, listen, Honey. It's that you're less aware of your effect than most people. You underestimate yourself. That's why you're so scared of the consequences, of doing anything. And then you hold back because of that.
Angelique: A vicious cycle. Oh shit. It doesn't matter.
Aspera stretches out her legs so that her foot is touching Angelique's thighs. They smile at each other. Then Angelique looks down and sighs. Aspera continues to look at her.
Aspera: You're so good at getting attention, Honey.
Angelique: *Lifting her head.*
What?
Aspera: Yeah, you are. When you sit like that, I just

want to put my arms around you and save you from the world.
Angelique smiles.

Angelique: You think you could save me from the world?
Aspera: I'll keep you in this room. Maybe I'll take you out every once in a while.
Angelique: To show to your friends?
Aspera: Yeah. You can be my secret mistress.
Angelique: *Dryly*
Sounds more like a wife.
Aspera: Well, what's the difference?
Angelique: I don't know. A mistress has more dramatic connotations. Also, you don't inevitably get landed with kids.
Aspera: True.
Angelique: Look, I'll do it if you support me.
Aspera: Stay in this room all the time?
Angelique: Most of the time.
Aspera: You'd go crazy.
Angelique: Maybe that's what I should do.
Aspera: Go crazy?
Angelique: Yeah. Would you take care of me, then?
Aspera: It would depend on how you were crazy.
Angelique: *Dryly*
I guess I'll have to go crazy according to your taste, then.
Aspera: *Smiling.*
I wouldn't worry about it.
Angelique smiles, lights a cigarette. Aspera stretches, rubs her foot against Angelique's thighs. Angelique moves both her legs against Aspera's. Pause.
Angelique: *Still smiling, looking up at Aspera.*
What do you worry about?
Aspera: You.
Angelique: And Lisa, and Adrien, and...
Aspera: Probably.
Pause. Aspera looks at Angelique, who has stopped smiling and is looking down.
What's so wrong with that?
Angelique: I don't know.
Aspera: I'm serious.
Angelique: Well,
Hesitating.
where's the Aspera who needs to be worried about? I don't know. I'm not saying it right.
Aspera: No. I see what you mean.
Pause.
But I don't always feel that strong.
Angelique: Then why do you always act that strong? You're not being honest with yourself, or with...
Aspera: No, you're wrong. I mean, I come first, if that's what you mean.
Angelique: Yeah.
Aspera: There are parts of me, feelings about myself, that are apart from you, and Lisa, and Adrien. But that doesn't mean the feelings I have about you are any less valid.
Angelique: I'm not saying that. But those other parts of you play no part in terms of us.
Aspera: Why should they?
Angelique: I don't know. Forget it.
Aspera: Sure.
She leans forward and rubs Angelique's shoulders lightly.
Angelique: Shit.
She gets up, goes over to the chair by the window, and sits down.
Aspera: What's the matter?
Angelique: I don't know. You always bring out the worst in me.
Aspera: What do you mean?
Angelique: I felt fine before you came. No, I don't mean it like that. It's just that I can pretend to myself that I'm OK, but the minute you walk into the room all my defenses against myself drop.
There's a long pause. Angelique sighs, leans back against the wall, stares out the window. Aspera watches her.
Aspera: *Softly.*
Honey, what's the matter?
Angelique: Nothing. Everything. What I said before about...
Aspera: Yeah, but be more specific.
Angelique: All right. One thing.
Hesitating.
Every time I see you, you've gone more away from me.
Aspera: People change.
Angelique: You haven't changed. It's not...
Aspera: Angie, we just...
Angelique: I know. We're ex-lovers now.
Slight pause.
But I'm scared. I feel like I'm in a void.
Aspera: Honey, you've had other lovers. Those reactions are...
Angelique: And like I've been in a void for a long time. That's what scares me.
Pause.
What you said, Aspera, about not always feeling strong. Well, nobody always feels strong. But none of us admit that. We're a masculine generation.
Aspera: In terms of being gay?
Angelique: No. I don't know. I mean, I know straight women who are like that, too. It's not that we're dikes.
Aspera: Then what do you mean?
Angelique: We live in our heads. And it's too easy to get out of touch. Intellect reasons, but it doesn't create reason. Maybe I can see myself better, even know myself better, through my head. But the fucked-up thing is, it's too separate, and not separate enough. Aspera, maybe there are things inside me that are growing, that'll explode with no warning. And maybe there's nothing, maybe I've died on myself. How do I know?
Aspera: You're doing it right now. Talking yourself into something that's absurd.
Angelique: Yeah.
Pause.
But you get to a point where you don't know whether you're talking yourself into something or out of something.
Pause.

Aspera: Angie, maybe you should go back to school.
Angelique: What good is that going to do?
Aspera: You'd be going somewhere.
Angelique: Changing my circumstances isn't going to change me.
Aspera: You've got to try things, Honey. You've got so many opportunities and you just...
Angelique: Sit In My Hole.
She continues to stare out the window, but she raises her glass in a mock toast.
You've got just as many opportunities, and you don't do a fucking thing either.
Aspera: But I'm not unhappy.
Angelique: How would you know?
Aspera: What's that supposed to mean?
Angelique: How can somebody who can't feel anything know whether they're happy or not?
Slight pause.
Aspera: When did you decide that?
Angelique: Maybe I've started seeing things more clearly.
Aspera: *Dryly, sarcastically.*
And, I suppose, you have to be honest with yourself.
Angelique: *Turning angrily.*
Yes. But you don't understand that, do you?
Aspera: *Slightly surprised.*
What are you so angry at me about?
Angelique: I don't know. I'm just tired of being Aspera's Angelique.
Aspera: What do you...
Angelique: You're always bigger than me. You're always on top. You take, Aspera. You suck people in, and then you take everything. But you never give, you never open up. I used to think you were so fucking strong, but you're not. All that strength is mine. Don't you see it's a power trip? Don't you see it's what everybody tries to get away from with men? We just...
Aspera: What?
Angelique: You're always the powerful one. You always take priority for me. I'm passive, you're dominant. What I say means shit, what you say is absolute.
Aspera: *Dryly*
I'm the man.
Angelique: Yeah. Oh fuck, Aspera. I'm not saying you're a dike. But I was living your life, I was asking you all the questions, you weren't asking me.
Aspera: I'm the oppressor.
Angelique: Listen. All the things you say you believe in, all your values. Liberating yourself. If you can't look at yourself, if you're not in touch with what you're really feeling, really doing, how can you change? Just believing in things intellectually doesn't mean you act from them.
Aspera: I don't believe in women being passive in a relationship, whether it's with a man or a woman. If you're passive...
Angelique: Aspera, it can't be just me. We assumed we weren't playing roles, we persuaded ourselves individually that we weren't. If you do that it just goes on and on being repeated. There's no mutuality in our relationship. You have to control me because I confirm what you want to be. You're never little with me. And it's not just me. I do the same with other people, and so do you. Why do you always have to have a lover, you go from one to the next so quickly. Why are you so scared of being alone? Why are you so scared of making yourself vulnerable, of feeling things?
Aspera: I like being with people. I'm not self-sufficient in that way, and I don't want to be. You have a thing about being alone, Angie, about being self-sufficient. You always want to be alone, whether you want to be alone or not.
Angelique: I don't want to be dependent on somebody. I don't want to have to use people.
Aspera: It's not a question of using people, it's a question of learning. You say you want to go somewhere. Well, you can't go somewhere without people.
Angelique: And you don't go anywhere. You go round and round, doing the same things over and over again. You've got to start somewhere else. You've got to start by feeling things simply because you feel them, whether they're wrong or right or irrelevant. You've got this life, Aspera, that's all fixed up, and categorized. If something doesn't have the right proportions, if it might fuck up the works, you won't let it in. It's all pointless.
Aspera: My life's not pointless, Angie.
Angelique: Your life doesn't change. You don't change. You're too scared to. Everything has to confirm what you want to be. Why can't you just be who you are?
Aspera: I am what I am, to the extent that I can be.
Angelique: To the extent...
Aspera: You've got to compromise, Angie. Yes, I created my life. The world doesn't just give you everything. You've got to make your own place. If you want to be part of it, if you want to live, you can't be passive. You're so negative, you're...
Angelique: Yes, I'm negative!
She picks up a shoe and throws it.
My life sucks, and I'd be the last to deny it. But your life's not so much better. Maybe you are happy with it. But only because you've accepted it, accepted all the shit. And there's no reason to. You say I could go somewhere, well, so could you. You could change, you could start really living by all those big phrases you throw around. But you refuse change. You deny even the possibility of changing by saying you don't need to, you don't want to. And for what? For the sake of security. Because you're scared.
She hesitates.
Aspera: Go on.
They look at each other. There is a long pause. Angelique looks down at the floor and sinks back against the wall.
Angelique: I can't tell the difference between anything anymore. When I'm winning I think I'm losing, and when I'm losing I think I'm winning.

Aspera: Why does there have to be a contest?

Angelique: There doesn't. It just helps to clarify things.
Pause.
You know, sometimes I feel like I'm confessing my sins when I talk to you.

Aspera: Me being a priestess and all.
They both laugh. There's a pause.
Aspera is smiling, mocking.
Sometimes I feel, Angelique, like I can't live up to your expectations of me.
Pause.

Angelique: Do you want another drink?
She gets up.

Aspera: No.
Angelique goes over to the desk, pours herself a drink, goes to the bed, sits down on it, lights a cigarette. The women stare at each other. Aspera is intent upon Angelique, who jerks her head away.
Relax, Honey, what are you so...?

Angelique: You can't...
She takes a deep breath, trying to make herself relax.
You can't absolve me any more.

Aspera: I can't give your life value if you don't feel it has any. I think it does, but I can't...

Angelique: I know.

Aspera: Angie, you've got to pull yourself together.

Angelique: With what? Everything negates itself before I even get there.

Aspera: You run away before you get there. You write, but you say you can't write, and you won't let anyone read it. You get yourself the worst job you could possibly get. You won't go back to school. Give yourself a chance.

Angelique: Everything I've ever done has been a complete fuck-up.

Aspera: You've never stayed long enough at anything. Just commit yourself a little. Find something that's interesting and do it.

Angelique: *Gets up and begins to pace around the room.*
But don't you see, if I commit myself....I'm trapped now, in my head. And I'm also trapped in your image of me, and even my image of me. If I committed myself, if I said this is what I am, this is what I'll always want to be, it would make it that much worse. You say you are what you want to be, but is that all you are? Are you only what you do, and what other people say you are? Aspera, if your life wasn't...

Aspera: But it is. You've got to accept that at some point, Angelique. You can't keep on running away. There are no "absolute truths," only truths as you see them. And what's important is only what you make important.

Angelique: I know that, Aspera, but that's not the point. It's like I have a sense of myself....

Aspera: I....

Angelique: Wait. I have a sense of you, too. It's not really something you can define.

Aspera: Yeah. And you don't lose that because you commit yourself to something. That's...

Angelique: No. I don't think you lose it completely. But you can stop being in touch with it. You become what you're committed to. You become defined by what you do, or by what other people see you as, and then you're caught. You start acting from the outside, instead of from the inside.

Aspera: Angie, I don't...

Angelique: It's like, when you haven't seen yourself in a mirror for awhile, you sometimes forget what you look like, and when you try and remember you get all these different images.

Aspera: Angelique, listen, what's so terrible about the way I live?

Angelique: It's not the way you live, in particular, it's what happens to you.

Aspera: But you have to...

Angelique: I know I have to. It's inevitable. It's sort of impersonal. It's like I'm being dragged in all directions, and I have no control, except that I'm doing it to myself.

Aspera: Then you have to get yourself out of it.

Angelique: Yeah, Aspera. But don't you see why I'm procrastinating. However remote and confused I feel, however subjectively I see things, I do see them. And once I commit myself, once I find a pattern of living that I like, then...

Aspera: It doesn't mean you stop being able to see things.

Angelique: Maybe not completely. For some people, maybe not at all. But it happens so easily. People start defining you, not as Angelique, but as Angelique who does such and such, who is something. And they relate to you in terms of your actions, or the roles you play. And then you start seeing yourself like that, and you use them to confirm it. You live by what you are, not who you are.

Aspera: But why do you stop being able to see things?

Angelique: You're just nursing me through this, aren't you?

Aspera: I think you need to get it out of your system.

Angelique: Yeah, and it's OK for you to listen to my revelations because you decided they weren't directed against you.

Aspera: Maybe I should leave.
She gets up, looks for boot, paces.

Angelique: If you could just...
She stops. Pause.

Aspera: What?
Pause.

Angelique: Don't you ever get scared?

Aspera: Of *what*?!

Angelique: Oh, Jesus, that's such a stupid question to ask you.

Aspera: Angie.

Angelique: We're not getting anywhere, right?

Aspera: Where are we supposed to be getting?

Angelique: You're so fucking in control, Aspera, you're so fucking logical. The male syndrome, removed and logical. Let's be civilized, dear.

Aspera: *Screams.*
Angie, just stop it!
Angie impulsively grabs Aspera in a tight hug.

Aspera: *Not reacting, shaking Angelique off*

Well, you wanted me to react. I've reacted.

Angelique: Oh God.
She begins laughing. Pause.

Aspera: Look. I'm not doing you much good like this.
She puts on a boot.

Angelique: What are you going to do?

Aspera: What?

Angelique: What are you going to do?

Aspera: What do you mean?
Angelique starts pacing again.

Angelique: I don't know. Are you going to stay here? Are you going to keep on seeing me?

Aspera: *Takes off the boot again.*
Yes.

Angelique: Why?

Aspera: Angie, what are you doing?
Slight pause.

Angelique: Why don't you get out of here?
Aspera kisses Angie's hand.

Aspera: Do you want me to?

Angelique: No. I don't know. Maybe I'm just tired.
Angie goes to the desk, sits down, and begins lighting matches. Aspera, on the bed, picks up a book. This goes on for an agonizing interval. Then Angie lights a piece of paper from one of her stories. At last, Aspera sees the piece of burning paper, rushes over, grabs it from Angie's hand, stamps it out with a shoe. She glares at Angie, curses, and goes back to the bed. Another pause.

Aspera: You've got to do something.

Angelique: Yeah.
She begins lighting matches again.
I wish I could say "no."
Pause.
What would happen if two of your girl friends cracked up at the same time?
She turns and looks at Aspera.
I'm sorry.

Aspera: You think you're cracking up?

Angelique: Do you?

Aspera: No.

Angelique: Then I guess I'm not.

Aspera: I think you should pull yourself together.

Angelique: Then you do think I'm cracking up.

Aspera: No. I don't think you're cracking up.

Angelique: But you think I will crack up if I don't do something about myself.

Aspera: I think this whole conversation about your cracking up is absurd.

Angelique: Are you scared of going crazy? Of people going crazy?
She doesn't wait for a reply, her mood changes.
Aspera, what am I going to do?

Aspera: Angie, I can't tell you that.

Angelique: *Mocking.*
You're not going to decide for me?

Aspera: I can't run your life. First you say that the whole problem with our relationship is that I was running your life, and now you want me to.

Angelique: *Half muttering.*
That's the whole point.

Aspera: If I ran your life for you, would that make you happy?

Angelique: *Bitterly mocking.*
Would it make me happy?
She walks toward Aspera.
Would it make you happy? Are you happy?
Looking her in the face.
Are you happy?

Aspera: It has. . .

Angelique: You don't even know if you're happy. Look, you better watch out if you don't know if you're happy.

Aspera: Angie, you've got to get out of this.

Angelique: Because you can't stand it?

Aspera: Because we're driving each other crazy.

Angelique: See.

Aspera: Look, we're both tired. If we go to bed, we'll feel better in the morning.

Angelique: No, You're not seeing me, you're still not seeing me. You'll take care of me, protect me from myself like I'm an infant, but you won't look at me, at what you're taking care of. You have to preserve that image. Why are you so scared of seeing me?

Aspera: Angie.

Angelique: You know what I feel like, Aspera? I feel like I'm nothing. I've disappeared into nothing. I'm not really here.

Aspera: Angie, you're here, you exist. I can touch you.
She touches her. Angelique repulses the touch angrily.

Angelique: How can you touch me? You don't know who to touch? I can't feel you. You can't touch me. You're too scared to touch me. Why are you scared of me?

Aspera: Angelique.

Angelique: Maybe it's you, not me.

Aspera: What do you mean?

Angelique: Who do you think I am if it's me?

Aspera: You're. . .

Angelique: Do you think I'll ever let you define me again? Your memory can play tricks on you, you know. How can you say what I am now, if I'm not what I was then? And who was I then, if I'm not now?

Aspera: *Smiling, as though it were a joke.*
You're you.

Angelique: *She lies back on the bed. Writhes dramatically, sexily.*
I'm nothing.
Aspera laughs and jumps on top of her. She kisses her neck, etc. while Angie talks.
A hunk of nothing flesh. The flesh is all that's left to go.
They both laugh.
Do you laugh only in obeisance to your lust? Your lust for a piece of nothing flesh?
She throws Aspera off angrily.
But it's not lust for the flesh, it's lust for the nothing.
She laughs softly.

Aspera: You've got to stop it. You've got to get. . .

Angelique: *She gets up.*
Not-nothings are something, is that it? A rock

is a...

Aspera: Angie, those are words!

Angelique: Shall I dance for you then?

She begins to dance. Aspera grabs her by the shoulders.

Aspera: Angie, you are something. You can be something.

Angelique: *Angelique stops. She looks at Aspera in surprise, and then, her voice is low, fierce, horrified.*

I don't want to be anything. I don't want to be what I am, and I'll end up dead anyhow. I don't want to wait years and years to be nothing. I don't want to spend years and years alone, doing nothing over and over again.

Aspera: Angie, that can't be true.

Angelique: Look at you. You can't even hate me because I'm nothing.

She walks toward the mirror.

And I can't hate you because you took everything. If I hated you, I'd hate everything that I was, that used to mean something.

Staring in the mirror, she screams.

I hate myself! Every time I breathe I hate myself! Why can't you just let me be nothing?!

Aspera leads Angie to the bed. Angie struggles mildly.

Leave me alone, why can't you leave me alone...

Aspera: Just lie down now, Angie, lie down...

Angie lets herself be placed on the bed. Aspera sits down next to her, strokes her. Angelique grabs the bottle of vodka, sips from it, rocks it in her arms as she talks.

Angelique: I feel like I'm dead. Except there are worms crawling around inside me. That's all that's alive, those worms.

She laughs softly.

Wait till they get you, Aspera. All the things you can't do, all the things you did wrong, all the horrible things you are, they start eating at you, eating from the bottom up where you don't notice them so much.

Aspera: Angie, try and sleep.

Angelique: Then you start sleeping too much and drinking too much so you can't feel them eating at you. But they do. Eat at you, eat at you until you're nothing. Nothing but worms. They like alcohol, they like sleep...

Aspera: Angie, just stop it. Just stop thinking about it.

Angelique: Stop thinking. I can't stop. If you stop thinking, if you stop seeing, knowing, you're dead.

Aspera: You won't die, Angelique. You'll still be able to think. But if you'd stop thinking those thoughts...

Angelique: *Yelling.*

They're my thoughts!! I won't think your thoughts. I've been what you wanted me to be, but I won't be created in your image now. And I won't live in your world over and over again.

Aspera: *Yelling back at her.*

Then make your own world!

Angelique: I did! Look at it! Look at it, for once. Too much alcohol, too much sleep, and worms.

Aspera: Then change it. Are you so weak that you give up when something goes wrong?

Angelique: There's nothing to give up.

Aspera: *Blowing up.*

You're alive! You can walk, and talk, and you can think. You can do something with yourself. You can stop sleeping too much, and

She grabs the bottle away from Angelique and slams it back on the table.

drinking too much. You can make something of your life. And you can give up?! Just give up?! Do you have the right to...

Angelique: Right! That's all I am to you, is a right!

She takes the bottle back.

Aspera: I didn't...

Angelique: And the worms don't matter, do they? I'm just a fucking page in your little black book.

Aspera: Angie.

Angelique: I hate you and I hate myself and it's got nothing to do with right.

Angie commences to drink all that is left in the bottle—it is perhaps three quarters full, in one uninterrupted draught. She gags, splutters, but keeps drinking. When the bottle is empty, she throws it on the floor. Aspera watches with growing horror. Once or twice she reaches out a hand, then draws it back. When Angie has almost finished the bottle, Aspera suddenly begins to put on her boots.

Aspera: I don't know what the fuck you expect me to do. You're doing this to yourself, Angie. There's nothing I can do. I don't know what you want from me.

Angie finishes the bottle, lurches towards Aspera.

Angelique: What are you doing?! You can't go?! Not GO!!

They tussle. Angie, a reeling deadweight, tries to prevent Aspera from tying her boots. Aspera pushes her off, Angie throws herself on Aspera again and again

Aspera: I don't know what you want from me!

Yelling.

I've got my own problems! I didn't do this to you, Angie!

Angelique: You can't leave me, you're always leaving me, don't leave me here, don't go, Aspera. Aspera, don't leave me alone... (etc.)

Aspera finishes lacing her boots and makes for the door. Angie is dragged to the floor as she attempts to hold Aspera back; she continues wailing from the floor.

Angelique: Don't leave me! Don't! You won't look at me, you don't see me... don't go! You don't see me! WHY WON'T YOU LOOK AT ME?!?!

Aspera: *Stands in the doorway and screams.*

I'm looking at you Angie—and I can't stand it!!!

She slams the door. Angie, on the floor, begins to sob, first quietly, then louder and louder. "Guilty" comes on again as the lights fade. Curtain. ●

PLUGS

With Poe at Midnight, a one-hour television drama with Will Stutts as Edgar Allan Poe, is available for cable system broadcast, Public Television, or in two 30-minute parts for schools and colleges. The program weaves together the life and the work of this influential American writer in a way that clarifies the personal motivations behind his unique contribution to literature. A Discussion Guide for classroom use is provided with each purchase. The program is available in ¾" U-matic, VHS, Beta I, or 16-mm film. A ten-minute sampler of excerpts from the program is available for pre-purchase preview. CONTACT: Media Concepts, Inc., 331 N. Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107, (215) 923-2545.

Cobblestone: the History Magazine for Young People is a publication created by teachers and aimed at inspiring students to become involved in American history. The magazine is intended to supplement the history textbook. It contains insights, background, anecdotal stories, lore, oral history, games, entertaining quizzes, learning cartoons, and social history. Available from: Cobblestone Publishing, Inc., 28 Main Street, Peterborough, NH 03458.

Letters Magazine is back after a year's publishing hiatus. The magazine is an international literary forum for women and men, focusing on real letters, poems, stories, journal entries, dreams, and graphics. The magazine is edited by Carole Bovoso and James Lecesne and is currently accepting manuscripts for a Spring Issue about MEN. Deadline for this issue is February 28. Subscriptions: $10.00 for 4 issues / $3.00 single issue, P.O. Box 786, Church Street Station, New York, N.Y. 10008.

AWP Catalogue of Writing Programs: third edition (August, 1980). Course offerings and degree programs in creative writing at 251 U.S. colleges and universities and five Canadian Schools. Entries include narrative descriptions with faculty and their publications, description of courses, special features. 8½" by 11", 128 pages, perfectbound, with an index by state. ISBN #0-936266-01-5. LC # 80-67017. Copies are $5.00 each from the Associated Writing Programs, c/o Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23508. AWP is a national, non-profit organization supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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LISTINGS

Susan Perlstein is the director of the Hodson Drama Group, which consists of twelve women between the ages of seventy-five and eighty-five. They have been together for three years, writing and performing living history plays. The group has appeared on Channel 31 in a series on outstanding work in community arts. Two works by the group are *Women of Hodson*, about the use of oral history in creating plays; and *Grandma's Home Remedy Show*, contrasting the use of home remedies with modern clinic care. A photo essay on the group was on display throughout November 1980 at the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

Marc Kaminsky's latest book of poems, *Endings*, will be published by Sun Press some time in the near future.

Jean Baur is teaching at P.S. 173. She will have poems in the next issue of *Some*. This fall she was in a workshop taught by Ai.

Hariette Surovell has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Bill Zavatsky returns to T&W after a three-year absence, during which he taught creative writing at the University of Texas at Austin and Sarah Lawrence College and held an NEA Fellowship in Poetry. His press, SUN, has now brought out 23 books of contemporary American poetry and translation, with books by Marc Kaminsky, Greg Kuzma, Paul Violi, Andrei Codrescu, and others anticipated in the 1980-81 season. He has also started to republish *Sun*, a literary magazine. Zavatsky plans to publish a new book of his own poetry in 1981 and a translation of *Clair de terre*, the first half of André Breton's poetic work. This year he will be teaching at Lynbrook High School and P.S. 75 for T&W.

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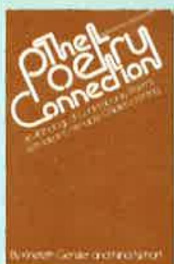

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