

Mina Shaughnessy

THE ENGLISH PROFESSOR'S MALADY¹

It occurred to me not long ago, after having spent close to a decade seeking for ways to help ill-prepared, so-called remedial, students learn to write, that I had perhaps been working on the wrong question. Instead of asking how to go about this task, I should probably, I realized, have been asking why so many English professors don't want to do it—and probably wouldn't even if our methods were to be measurably improved.

I have always liked English teachers, both as my teachers and, later, as my colleagues. They have seemed to me a particularly human group of professionals, with more self-irony and grace than the run of academicians, with even a kind of seasoned and pleasing worldliness that I have always supposed to be one of the results of spending so much time reading and talking and writing about great works of literature.

Still, I must admit that except for a few of the profession's stars, the bulk of the work in basic writing has so far been taken up only by the most marginal members of the profession—beginning teachers or graduate students, paraprofessionals, women, minorities, and of late, the underemployed but tenured members of other departments.

I have by now experienced this division of labor within the profession on a variety of campuses throughout the country. For me, the experience begins, generally, with an invitation to visit a campus as a consultant. Later I usually learn that the invitation has been hard-won by a cluster of basic writing teachers, with occasionally the support of a conscientious chairman, who have somehow managed to wrest some department funds for the occasion and are determined to make good use of it—of me, that is.

The invitation asks me to advise them on a number of specific matters—the creation of a more efficient writing lab, per-

haps, or the design of a placement test. And each time, I set off with my wares in a canvas satchel, expecting to talk shop with a few practitioners. But almost invariably, when I arrive, I find that I have been called on quite another mission from the one specified in the invitation: I have been sent for, it turns out, to preach religion to the unconverted—at breakfast, or luncheons, cocktails, and teas. I have been “planted” by the writing teachers in an effort to persuade English professors, and perhaps a dean or so for good measure, that it is both pedagogically possible and intellectually respectable to teach ill-prepared freshmen to write for college.

Now this sort of assignment would seem to me a perfectly honorable one to accept provided one’s evangelism took hold and one could claim here and there a stable convert. But I have usually left each campus in its Laodicean calm, my satchel full of unused hand-outs and my spirit daunted by the engaging, impervious sufficiency of English professors.

It was after a number of such experiences, as I was saying, that I decided to take a closer look, not at the problems of basic writing students, but at the conditions that seem to govern the response of English professors to these students and to the subject of writing. And in my reasoning about the matter, I have come up with three conditions besides that of original sin, that figure in what I am calling the English professor’s malady.

First, I would suggest that the subject of writing in most English departments is so flatly and narrowly perceived that it cannot be competitive with other subjects within the department. As a result it becomes the penalty courses in most teachers’ programs, the courses that full professors are often excused from teaching or that all teachers nobly accept as part of the price teachers pay for teaching their “real” subjects. It is the subject, too, which most English professors have never had to study formally and the subject, therefore, that suffers most from a kind of *laissez-faire* entrepreneurship that generates each season a flurry of bright texts, only a few of which represent the best energies and motives of their authors. They are not books important enough to English professors to argue about. Many are never reviewed. They are academically unimportant occurrences in a vast ecumenical reserve called freshman or developmental or compensatory or remedial or basic English.

I do not at this point want to make the usual criticism of the profession for the emphasis it is said to have placed upon its custodial role in the teaching of writing, that is, upon the

achievement of formal correctness and the mastery of the academic genres. To teach toward such competencies seems to me both realistic and respectable. My argument is that for the most part, professors have perceived these tasks in pedagogically and linguistically unsophisticated ways and have as a result too often bored or defeated both themselves and their students.

This territory of the professor's general ill-preparedness can be divided into three parts. The first part concerns their unfamiliarity with the psychology of writing, that is, with the behavior of writing itself—how the ideas that lead to writing are generated, how they undergo stages of formulation and reformulation, how designs for the ordering and elaboration of ideas evolve, how certain tasks specific to writing (such as revising and proofreading) which are contrary to our impulses as speakers are acquired, or how writing affects cognitive style and development.

Already a substantial body of literature exists on the nature of the composing process, some of it going back to Aristotle, but except for the rhetoricians among us—and they tend either to have split off from English departments or to have taken them over—the subject has inspired little research or pedagogical reform.

Then there is the historical part of writing—the record of what has gone on in the name of freshman composition over the past hundred years or so and the even more interesting record of how ordinary people learned to write and how they used writing in earlier eras of this country's history. From such records we begin to suspect (and studies of the history of literacy in America support this suspicion) that the ability to write was once distributed more widely across classes than it is today and that the uses of writing were more varied and personally gratifying than they are today. Restricted in our notions of what writing is for, we tend to present the skill either as a prestigious or exotic accomplishment (like being able to sketch or play the piano in Jane Austen's world) or as a bread-and-butter skill that guarantees mobility from jobs into professions. Such limited perceptions of this quite remarkable invention called writing encourage us to accept current ways of organizing and assessing writing instruction. They lock us into convictions about what is most important to learn, who should learn what, or who should teach whom at a point when the uses of literacy in this society need to be re-examined, when the possibilities for a much richer definition of literacy exists alongside

the threat of a more and more exclusive cultivation of that power.

Third, there is what might be called the anthropological or cultural part of writing, by which I mean the study of the functions as well as the forms of academic writing, the attempt to construct the social realities that give rise to specific kinds of behavior, in this case to specific kinds of writing. Here I am suggesting that it is useful for teachers to think of college as a foreign land, a little world, if you will, with ways of perceiving and doing things that often seem peculiar or arbitrary to students. To someone from within that world, academic discourse is a way (to some *the way*) of using thought and language so as to make the largest general statements possible across a range of data and to do so for an audience that is expected to scrutinize the generalizations and the data.

From many students' perspective, however, academic writing⁶ is a formidable hurdle--an unfriendly register which pitches the writer against an anonymous and exacting reader who is apparently interested in arguments about issues that are either so grand as to be outside the possible control of either writer or reader or so refined as to seem foolish. At the same time, the writer's own impressions and convictions seem to become insubstantial unless they can in some way be neutralized by language and a special kind of analysis.

To approach such discourse in formulaic ways—simply identifying the recurrent and quantifiable features of the sentences, paragraphs, and parts of essays or research papers is to assume already a kind of cultural consent and understanding among students, which in fact does not exist widely today. Somehow teachers must find ways of explaining the tasks of academia so that they make sense as human strategies, ways of solving the problems academicians pose for themselves. And it is difficult to imagine how they can do this without looking both more seriously into the sorts of discourse they generate and more widely at the various ways in which language is shaped to do the work of human communities.

It is hard, too, to imagine a pedagogy growing out of this perspective that would not be much more concerned than most pedagogies now are with the sequence and fit of lessons from one session to the next, as the student moves from the familiar strategies of conversation and the easier forms of writing into the denser forests of formal writing.

The English professor's malady, I am suggesting, then, is at

least partly caused by provincialism—by too “local” a conception of the subject he teaches—its processes, its history, and its context. I would add to this a second, somewhat similar, condition that helps explain the malady—a tendency to underestimate the capabilities and the difficulties of students whose backgrounds and states of preparation are very different from his.

It is vital, of course, for a teacher to believe in the educability of his students. We tend finally to turn away from problems we can do nothing about. This is an intelligent response to futility. And the teacher who believes that his students are too limited or too far behind to learn what he has learned is almost certain to prove his point. Thus it becomes critically important that the teacher be right about such perceptions. And here he encounters difficulties, for he has generally had little experience with severely ill-prepared adult students and cannot, or at least ought not to, judge their capabilities until he has committed his best energies and imaginations to teaching them—a commitment he is not likely to make if he already believes them ineducable.

The only way out of this dilemma is for the teacher to hypothesize the educability of his students and to look at their behavior as writers from such a perspective, assuming, that is, that while what they write may be wrong or inappropriate or inadequate in relation to the models they must learn, their behavior is neither random nor illogical but ingeniously adaptive at one moment, linguistically conservative at another, or relentlessly—albeit wrongly—logical at still another.

Having by now examined thousands of student essays from such a perspective, I can commend the perspective as both pedagogically fertile and linguistically fascinating. Without ignoring the goal of correctness and cogency, the method liberates the teacher from a narrowly prescriptive response to student writing. It reveals in precise ways the intermixing of grammatical forms and logics from different grammatical systems, the intrusions of speaking strategies and habits into written English, the gaps and distortions from earlier instruction, and—above all—the persistent, ingenious urgings of intelligence, of the drive to do things for a reason, to create systems, to survive, by wit.

To discover, however, that literateness is not to be confused with intelligence and that young adults who by all traditional measures don't belong in college do in fact have the capability

of surviving and even flourishing there is to discover more truth than an English teacher may want to bear alone.

And this brings me to my final point in this etiology of the English professor's malady—namely, that as writing instruction is presently organized, the teacher who wishes to give his best energies to the instruction of ill-prepared freshmen must be ready to forego many of the rewards and privileges of his profession. He must be resigned to being an altruistic teacher—and even though the study of literature may well have ripened the moral imaginations of English teachers to such an extent that the profession produces more than its share of generous (or as some would have it, bleeding) hearts, the fact remains that systems do not function efficiently on altruism, and the educational system must offer the same sorts of prizes and incentives that energize people in other systems—money, time, security, and working conditions that encourage excellence—if the teaching of writing is to advance beyond its present state.

To this, we must add another rude fact—that despite the opening of many educational doors since the late sixties, there is little evidence that much has changed behind those doors. If anything, the lines that divide the privileged from the unprivileged in this society have simply been extended into the terrain of higher education. And nowhere is the line between the two groups more sharply drawn than in the area of writing.

Of the two skills of literacy, reading has ever been judged the more important skill for ordinary citizens to acquire. Some people—English teachers among them—have even insisted that writing is a skill not everyone *can* acquire or needs to acquire, especially in an age when television and tapes have liberated speech from transiency and telephones have reduced the burden of ritual and routine correspondence.

To be sure, learning to write is hard work. And few, even among those who become highly skilled at it, ever seem to do it for fun, as they might watch television or read a book. Still, there is a special advantage to learning how to get one's thoughts down on a page, one that is related to the very functioning of a democracy. For one can imagine the advantages to any state of having a population of readers: reading remains the cheapest and most efficient technology for passing out directions and information and propaganda. But it is in the nature of writing to encourage individuals to discover and explore their own hunches, to ponder their own words, to respect their own thoughts enough to entrust them to the written page. Writing

even teaches about reading. It is the other side of literacy, without which the reader too often reads uncritically.

Despite these benefits, or possibly because of them, the skill of writing in this society is essentially a class-distributed skill. Unless they are exceptionally talented, the children of the poor learn even less about writing than about reading. They learn handwriting, perhaps, in the early grades, but most of them leave school without having learned to compose and perfect their thoughts in the medium that allows for the greatest independence of mind and exacts the greatest effort at articulation. What is worse, they leave school persuaded that they were in some way natively unqualified to learn to write and must now find ways of evading the various writing tasks that are certain to be posed for them in their work and in their lives as parents and citizens.

The experience of open admissions both at City University and in other universities and colleges throughout the country has not only revealed the plight of such students but demonstrated that there are no pedagogical reasons why writing should be an exclusive skill rather than a common skill among our citizenry. It simply needs to be taught. And the fact that it is not taught well—and sometimes not taught at all—to the students who need it most constitutes a true crisis of literacy in this country, where being able to initiate messages should be as important as being able to receive them and where the most fruitful and necessary activity is arguing rather than agreeing.

Today, people are, for the most part, alarmed over the declining levels of literacy among the privileged, not over the traditional sub-literacy of the poor, and it is in the prestigious colleges that a new seriousness about writing can now be found. But until the traditional illiteracy is as alarming to the American people as the declining literacy of the affluent, our schools will continue to cultivate advanced literacy as a privilege rather than an entitlement.

To prepare only some people to flourish in a democracy and then to argue that they are the only people with the native ability to do so is to consent to the existence, within the boundaries of what we call public education, of the most exclusive country club of all.

I am not certain what English Department chairmen can do or what they might want to do about so large a problem. The responsibility for doing something has clearly fallen disproportionately upon English departments and some would argue that

the English professor's very love of literature and his preparation to teach it have paradoxically robbed him of the patience and modesty needed to teach basic writing. If so, then of course the responsibility of a chairman might be simply to lead his department out of the wilderness of basic writing and into the promised land of literature. But should he decide instead to stay and try to bring some measure of order and meaning and—yes, even class—to the subject of basic writing, he will be struggling to meet the claims of both literature and literacy upon a department, and in doing this he will be helping his professors learn to *want* to do the work that waits to be done.

Note

¹Address delivered at the Association of Departments of English Conference, Albany, New York, June 1977. Reprinted from *Journal of Basic Writing* 3.1 (Fall/Winter 1980): 91-97.