

Irene G. Dash

## THOSE "BULBOUS LIVER-COLORED" WORDS

How does one help students expand their vocabulary? Anyone who has taught writing has surely at some time tried the seemingly direct method of offering lists of new words, asking students to look up definitions, and then requiring the words to be used in original sentences. And anyone who has tried this experiment has known the frustration of reading strangely contorted sentences in which the new words, incorrectly used, nevertheless conform to dictionary definition. But other methods exist.

I first discovered a technique for vocabulary building when I was thrown into a new adventure in teaching—an advanced writing course. "How advanced is advanced?" I wondered. With the brashness and confidence of someone believing in the unlimited capacity of "advanced" students, I settled on *The Tempest* as the work which would provide inspiration, thematic ideas, vocabulary, and term paper material for an entire semester.

Although I have never again committed myself to one whole term with a single Shakespeare play in a writing course, I learned a great deal and took the vocabulary building methods back to my basic writing classes. The advanced writing students were not nearly so advanced as I had expected. Vocabulary and Shakespeare's use of language proved quite difficult for them. I was forced to teach the meaning of metaphor and its function in enriching writing. I also hoped to inspire a zest for the text despite its difficulty. Fundamental to this was vocabulary—a knowledge of the meaning of words.

My method was to combine the two—metaphors and individual words—in a writing assignment, following a close reading of a small segment of text. We looked for metaphors. The students seemed to understand the range of word pictures possible and the value of images in projecting abstract ideas. Next, I had to limit the field: I decided to divide the play among the students. Since there is always one student who

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asks incredulously, voice rising hysterically at the end of the sentence, "Do you mean we should go through the whole play?" I soothingly assured that person, "Oh, no, just a short section each." Students tend to be remarkably exact when requesting an instructor to define the parameters of an assignment (no matter how inexact they are when complying with it). I therefore created boundaries. Originally, I considered breaking the play down by scenes; but Shakespeare's scenes vary greatly in length. Therefore, I callously divided the play by pages of text—a division which, while it may have hurt my aesthetic sensibilities, won the students' approval for its fairness. Of course I was relying on Shakespeare to give each student a break! He did. Difficult words were sprinkled throughout. When, in two instances, sections proved particularly thin in metaphors, I permitted the students to raid the territory of their peers.

I then required each student to list the metaphors as well as the new and difficult words in her or his section. After we had examined these lists in class, discarding some words and phrases, and stressing the meaning, both explicit and implicit, of others, I asked the students to write an essay or short imaginative story using words and metaphors from their lists. Here indeed was a reversal of the usual plagiarism warning: an instructor was insisting on the students' using borrowed words.

The results were astonishingly creative, almost as if one had taught a few dance movements, then asked the student to incorporate these actions into a single flowing unified dance. Of course not all members of the class joyously attacked the assignment. Some writhed and complained. It was impossible, they thought. Then people who had completed the work read their papers aloud. Incredulity greeted some papers; approving laughter, others. The non-writers applauded the skill and ingenuity of their peers. One especially successful story was a wild tale describing the adventures of two children who had drunk their parents' whiskey and were found sleeping under the table by a returning father. The words of Caliban ran through the paper; the action of the play inspired the idea. The writing breathed with Shakespeare's language, and the students recognized its richness.

The assignment worked so well I brought it back to my expository writing class. Since then, whether we have been reading Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," E.B. White's essay on New York, or any other of the few works read during a term dedicated to writing, I always use some version of this exercise. Students read; they look for words, word pictures, and metaphors; we discuss

sections of text. I then ask them to use some of these words or groups of words in a work of their own creation.

From O'Connor's story, for example, they choose the "hard words" and the "good pictures" as well as the "particularly colorful or good words." No one need feel ignorant in order to borrow from O'Connor. Her story abounds in riches worth plundering: "he braced himself," "a purple velvet flap," "two wings of gray hair protruded on either side of her florid face." Here the "two wings of gray hair," and the words "protruded" and "florid" all offer possibilities for the students.<sup>1</sup> A few other examples are the single word "jaunty," the descriptive "the sky was a dying violet," and the lengthy emotional response to ugliness, "the houses stood out darkly against it, bulbous liver-colored monstrosities." Depending on individual creativity, the student will seize less or more of a single word group. Thus "bulbous" or "bulbous liver-colored," or even the whole phrase applied to a description of a house may appear in a paper.

I never object if the students borrow large chunks—half sentences at a time—because somewhere along the way they lose their self-consciousness and jump into what seems a challenging game. Vocabulary building can work. One can acquire new words.

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1. Words like "braced" and "protruded" frequently form the subject of another, earlier, lesson: one aimed at eliminating the dull repetitious use of "is," "was," "am," "be," "have," and "take" as the only possible available verbs. The lesson itself combines a close search of text with an attempt to teach active verbs. In that case, we embrace "braced" and close our eyes to its weakness as a metaphor in this clause.