

Robert Lyons

MINA SHAUGHNESSY AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING

I am particularly honored to be asked to speak on this occasion—a conference dedicated to Mina Shaughnessy and her work. Mina herself liked conferences and she had special expectations of them. In Scott Fitzgerald's stories, there are characters who gaze up at the lighted windows of Manhattan buildings in twilight and are filled with a sense of wonder at the variety of life they sense behind those windows. Mina had some of that anticipation, transferred to conference rooms and conference panels. She was always arranging to have friends and colleagues sit in on sessions running at the same time as one she was attending, always insisting that something interesting was likely to happen at every meeting. No matter how exotic the conference setting, no matter how tempting the sightseeing or the restaurants, Mina would always set her schedule by the conference schedule, listening to as many papers and discussions and workshops as she could. How often her hopes at these gatherings were realized I can't say, but it was often enough to sustain her, for she never stopped poring over conference programs with an expression that belonged to a gambler reading the racing form at Aqueduct.

When I began to think about speaking today to CUNY teachers on Mina's work, I was, of course, reminded of the obvious point that her thought and writing were deeply rooted in the experience of this University. Her book, *Errors and Expectations*, begins by portraying the effects of Open Admissions on City College and its faculty, and the chapter "Expectations" which concludes the book should serve to define the obligations and mission of a great urban university. Most CUNY writing teachers, I think, feel a special relation to this wonderful book. It speaks not only *to* us, in the way of practical instruction, but also *for* us, expressing with such eloquence our own half-formulated purposes and goals. There

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are many passages in Mina's book that are revelations about teaching, and there are many others that strike a more familiar note and recapitulate some of our own experiences as teachers. I would like to quote a passage of the second kind and use it to characterize some of Mina's special concerns:

...Wherever the new students have arrived in substantial numbers, English teachers have begun to realize that little in their background has prepared them to teach writing to someone who has not already learned how to do it. Confident in the past that students who could not master certain "simple" features of English usage were probably not "bright" enough (a much-used term) to stay in college, they now begin to wonder, when large numbers of intelligent young men and women fail to learn a simple lesson, whether the lesson is indeed so simple. And once having asked this fruitful question, their own revolution as teachers of English usually begins.

This passage suggests that *Errors and Expectations* is the work of an academic revolutionary and I would like to explore that suggestion. First, I want to speak about the book itself and its method, and then I want to talk about the word "academic" as it might apply to this unusual book. Finally, I would like to consider in what sense the word "revolutionary" should be applied to this civilized, scholarly, immensely courteous author and her book.

A central concern in Mina's work is represented in one phrase from the passage I just quoted: "intelligent young men and women." The recognition of the intelligence and the adulthood of basic writing students is the key to virtually all that Mina has to say about the teaching of writing. Many teachers and writers had been aware that young people who have not succeeded in mastering the traditional school skills are nevertheless intelligent and worthwhile human beings. As all of us know, there is a substantial literature describing and championing the non-traditional student. Essentially, that literature concentrated on pointing to the special strengths that such students bring to the college environment and on challenging the inadequacies of our school systems or the larger failure of our social system.

Mina obviously knew this literature, shared its concerns, and voiced some of the same criticisms in her book. What was special to her was the decision to turn directly to the actual writing of such students where it most diverged from standard written forms and to raise the question of how these particular documents were themselves manifestations of the powers of "intelligent young men and women." When such student writing had previously appeared in print, it usually served as the "before" in a before and after illustration of some effective teaching technique or it demon-

strated particular features of dialect use or of second language interference. Other than that, such writing was rarely reproduced. It represented the dirty little secret of basic skills courses, classified information because if it leaked out it was sure to appear as part of some professor's demonstration that such students were on the face of it uneducable. This was not a matter of paranoia. It was clear from several essays on Open Admissions and from several letters to the *Times* that examples of unskillful writing by non-traditional students were considered a powerful weapon by those opposed to the broadening of public higher education. From this point of view, Mina had great courage in choosing to examine publicly such quantities of error-laden student writing. But clearly she did not intend her book to be an act of daring. Her controlling argument was that there is little that is random or illogical in such problematic student writing. Error, far more often than we suspect, is a matter of pattern, an effort of intelligence, even if that effort is faulty or misapplied. She needed to provide many examples in order to demonstrate the range of individual difficulties that create error.

The method that Mina used in analyzing error can be shown by quoting a representative passage from her book. In the chapter "Syntax" she discusses some ways in which the pronoun "it" may prove troublesome to inexperienced writers:

Part of the trouble with the word stems from its vagueness. Like other pronouns, *it* refers to something that has already been mentioned, but unlike *he* or *she*, it can refer to any *thing* in the world as well as to some beings (an animal, for example, or even a child when the sex is unknown or of no importance to the context). Beyond this, it can refer to ideas or situations or even to something in the mind of the writer that never quite gets stated on the page. (Certain idiomatic expressions illustrate this vagueness—"It may rain today." "How far is it to Wall Street?" "It's late." "Let him have it.") In analytical writing, where inanimate nouns and abstract terms tend to be more frequent than in talk or written narrative, the word *it*, with its broad range of designata and slight semantic weight, easily becomes a free-floating substitute for thoughts that the writer neglects to articulate and that the reader must usually strain to reach if he can. . . .

Mina here presents some characteristic features of "it" as potential sources of confusion; typically, her perspective is not on the grammatical rule but on the various ways a word or form behaves in actual use. Then she narrows down to consider the school situation: does analytic writing place particular stress on the form, or create special occasions for error? At this point, particular misuses of the form by basic writers are cited and categorized. In each instance, Mina's explanation centers on how the error

closely approximates an acceptable usage or how the writer thinks that the error serves his purposes. After introducing and commenting on these examples, Mina then says in a summary paragraph: "The two problems with *it* that have been touched on so far are different kinds of problems requiring different strategies" and proceeds to make a more general distinction between a semantic problem and a word-order problem. Then she moves on to consider yet another function of the pronoun "it." I deliberately chose this passage for discussion because it does *not* display Mina at her most eloquent. What it does do in a modest way is display her method, applied patiently and painstakingly to hundreds of student sentences and evolved in the same way by reading literally thousands of student essays. The persistent effort is to discriminate and classify errors, to order the apparently chaotic, to create a grammar out of ungrammaticality. The importance of such a method is that it introduces system without being reductive. It oversimplifies neither the complexities of English grammar nor the range of variation that articulate but inexperienced writers can create.

Reading this book, a teacher gains confidence through repeated encounters with the general principle that there is a logic of error ("The Logic of Error" was, in fact, Mina's original title for the book). This logic differs from student to student and it is to this logic that teachers must adapt their knowledge of systematic grammar. For example, the students whose errors were cited in the passage I read to you would not need to be guided through a handbook review of all pronoun forms, even though their errors involve a pronoun. They would need to be shown the connection between their idiosyncratic pattern and the pattern of standard written English.

Mina's sense, then, of the potentialities of the intelligent young men and women who are basic writing students led her to recognize the logic of error. Her method transforms the way a teacher would perceive and therefore respond to the omissions, confusions, and derailments that characterize the work of basic writing students. And because it makes us see what we are doing in a new way, *Errors and Expectations* can be called a revolutionary book.

At the same time, the book has virtually none of the attributes of academic books called revolutionary in the last decade. In fact it is remarkable that someone so deeply involved in the most contentious issue in higher education in New York, involved at a college where feelings about this issue were particularly intense, could write without any trace of revolutionary rhetoric. The reason, I think, is that much of the struggle of Open Admissions centered on what Mina saw as a false conflict between

those supporting the rights of a new group of non-traditional students and those insisting on the need to maintain academic standards. The two groups tended to see each other as enemies in this struggle. Advocates of Open Admissions appeared to their opponents as willfully destroying all that made colleges meaningful. Academic life and academic writing came more and more to seem (from the other side of the barricades) to represent outmoded or irrelevant concerns. In the teaching of writing, “academic,” for many defenders of the rights of non-traditional students, described a pedantic, rule-bound teacher who insisted on the stylistic etiquette of a by-gone day. Mina’s work is distinctive because it does not accept this kind of division. It both upholds the academic tradition and welcomes without condescension a new kind of student within that tradition. Mina recognized the differences between the students she taught and wrote about and the academic world, but she did not think the differences condemned either the student or traditional academic values.

Instead, her work both as a person and as a writer extended an invitation to the non-traditional student, not just to learn something, but to become a member of the academic community. If there was a generous idealism in Mina’s sense of her students and their potential, there was a similar idealism in her conception of the nourishing value of the academic tradition for any learner. That sense of idealism about higher education explains some of the paradoxical aspects of her own behavior—the fact that, living in the midst of an Open Admissions debate that found many scholarly humanists at their least humane, Mina should have a more uncritical admiration than most of us do for the great universities, for graduate training, for academic degrees and honors. She was always suggesting that the Ph.D. conferred special wisdom, despite all the evidence we sometimes see to the contrary. There was the further paradox that Mina—an authority on the teaching of basic writing—had as her favorite author Milton, that most academic of the great English poets. (Mina once said her ideal teaching schedule would be a section of Basic Writing and a course on Milton.) Another classic English writer that Mina greatly appreciated because of his relevance to academic writing was Francis Bacon. I remember her demonstrating in detail to a class of graduate students one day how Bacon could show them the way to organize a term paper. Just as Mina found something adult and intellectual in her young students, so she found something youthful and energizing in the tradition of academic discourse that influenced Milton and Bacon.

My point here about Mina’s work is therefore related to the one I made earlier about her sense of basic writing students: again, she went further than most of her colleagues in the kind of commitment she made to the

scholarly enterprise. While most of us believe in the value of a college education for our students, Mina had an extraordinary trust in the qualities of academic discourse and in the habits of mind that such discourse fostered. One of her great interests was to identify more precisely the distinctive qualities of academic prose, to analyze the set of rules that guided, consciously or unconsciously, the performance of a successful academic writer. Mina did not finally have the opportunity to do this analysis in the full and systematic way that she felt was necessary, but there are observations about this subject scattered through her work. I would like to draw on a few of her phrases here in order to convey her Baconian assumptions about academic writing. Such writing, she says, “aspires to high standards of verification and sound reason”; it requires “shrewd assessments of what constitutes adequate proof”; it demands “the stances of fairness, objectivity, and formal courtesy that smooth the surface of academic disputation.” Furthermore, academic writers need to be skilled in “habits of generalization.” “These habits require that writers not only make abstract statements in a language that has been especially developed to extend the ladder of abstraction beyond conventional needs, but that they be able to move back and forth between levels of generalization in the interest of supporting their abstract statements.” “Committed to extending the boundaries of the known, the scholar . . . is constantly proposing generalizations that cover the greatest possible number of instances. This requires both that he make statements that have broad applicability and that he defend them by the support of cases, arguments, and explanations.” And finally as a teacher of basic writing students, Mina wanted to know more about the nature of the academic vocabulary, the common stock of words that teachers use as well as the specialized terms of a particular discipline. (When she was at City College, she arranged to have several writing teachers each enroll in an introductory course in an unfamiliar subject area in order to identify its special vocabulary and the special conventions assumed by its writing assignments.)

I’ve used Mina’s comments on the features of academic writing quite extensively, because her book itself exemplifies and enacts all that she thought valuable in the academic mode. It is a book committed to sound reason, and to ordering and clarifying disparate examples of writing through rational discrimination. It is also a book that repeatedly demonstrates the power and value of the mind’s inclination to order, whether in establishing causes, identifying problems, or suggesting the procedures for solving those problems.

As a result, the book is habitually classifying, even numbering, as a way

of producing tentative order, from an early section describing “four grammatical concepts that underlie most student misunderstandings about forms” to a concluding review of “seven basic thought patterns that transcend the intellectual classifications of various disciplines.” And one can see in those two examples how she uses this power to order and generalize in the interest of creating a more powerful and more inclusive theoretical model for teachers—“the concepts that *underlie*,” “the *basic* thought patterns.” Yet this inclination to classify never hardens into the dogmatism of a rule book. Mina always acknowledges the complexity of her subject and its constantly shifting nature. She says at one point that grammar itself “is a web, not a list, of explanations, and often a seemingly simple feature of instruction will be located at the interstices of several grammatical concepts.” The remark is characteristic of her sense that, in writing instruction, the seemingly simple is often complex, but that, on the other hand, the seemingly chaotic conceals something coherent and systematic.

Errors and Expectations makes its claims on us, then, through the firmness and clarity of its discriminations—in part through the aptness of its illustrations, and in part through the skill with which it moves back and forth from the specific to the speculative. But there is one more quality that characterized academic writing for Mina and that should be included here: “the stances of fairness, objectivity, and formal courtesy.” Objectivity and formal courtesy are important when a writer is dealing, as Mina was, with material so susceptible to ridicule or to being dismissed as merely inconsequential. Mina’s own tact is evident throughout the book: she looks for no scapegoats, she neither creates nor acknowledges adversaries, and she does not establish her own approach by aggressively repudiating the views of others. It is surprising, when one thinks about it, how many books addressed to skills teachers are anecdotal, colloquial, chummy, or slightly comical in their relation with the reader, and full of examples dramatizing the author in the classroom. Mina uses none of these stratagems, and her personal dignity and respect for her readers, conveyed through the manner and tone of her book, give her a special kind of authority.

I have paid particular attention to the qualities of Mina’s writing that are bound up with the qualities of academic discourse because ultimately that is one of the book’s important legacies to teachers of basic writing, who have sometimes come to doubt their importance in the academic community. *Errors and Expectations* is an academic book in the sense that in its very language and structure and tone, it enacts the academic ideal. Mina’s craft is to demonstrate the habits of mind, the qualities of style, the

procedures of analysis and argument that academic training at its best can provide, and to bring those qualities to bear on matters of great human and moral concern.

For Mina, the technical mastery that enabled students to express themselves also made them freer intellectually. Skills teaching makes students aware of the linguistic rules that facilitate thought and communication. Those rules are mastered until they are no longer a matter of conscious effort. They become instead the habitual resources that allow students to create their own kind of writing performances based on choices *they* want to make. Mina often referred to training in ballet or piano (two kinds of training she herself had experienced) and found them analogous to training in the structure of sentences. “The practice of consciously transforming sentences from simple to complex structures (and vice versa), of compounding the parts of sentences, of transforming independent clauses into dependent clauses, of collapsing clauses into phrases or words, helps the student cope with the complexity in much the same way as finger exercises in piano or bar exercises in ballet enable performers to work out specific kinds of coordination that must be virtually habitual before the performer is free to interpret or even execute a total composition.” In Mina’s sense of the writer or the person, the goal is invariably choice, option, freedom—key words for her.

I would like to return to my original question—is *Errors and Expectations* the testament of an academic revolutionary? I have already suggested a typically academic answer: on the one hand, yes, since Mina transformed our way of seeing and judging what we do as teachers; on the other hand, no, since she was deeply committed to a tradition of academic discourse reaching back through the centuries. If we look again at the passage I quoted at the start of my talk and continue beyond its last sentence with the sentence that follows, we can see something of the same balancing tendency in Mina’s own language:

And having once asked this fruitful question their own revolution as teachers of English usually begins. It is a revolution that leads not inevitably or finally to a rejection of all rules and standards, which would be to deny the very point that is finally being made about language, namely that it is variously shaped by situations and bound by conventions, none of which is inferior to the others but none of which, also, can substitute for the others.

Rule and convention still must be taken into account, even in revolutionary situations. One way to resolve this question is to note that revolution is a word that Mina herself uses only rarely when she is describing what she and

other teachers are doing. Instead, her favorite metaphor is that of the frontier, apt enough, of course, for someone from South Dakota. The frontier of a profession was her term for basic skills teaching. She uses this image, characteristically, with great precision. The frontier is the place where everyone is a stranger, and where nobody is fully at home or settled in. In this new territory, everyone has to get his bearings, students and teachers alike, and everyone has to make adjustments in his habitual modes of thinking and acting. The frontier calls on everybody's resourcefulness and ingenuity in adapting his particular kind of knowledge to new situations. It also calls for a special openness and trust—in a difficult and sparsely populated land, people must cooperate for survival. And the frontier is finally a place where the future is necessarily more important than the past.

Mina's writing suggests much that we ourselves can do in the future. The last piece she published during her lifetime was titled "Some Needed Research on Writing." It is a poignant essay to read today, because it obviously sketches out work she was especially interested in and would have done herself, if she had lived. In the essay she proposes four broad questions that most urgently need to be answered, or to be given better provisional answers than we have produced up to now. Her questions play at the edges of *Errors and Expectations*, because they concern the successful instruction of the students who come to us for help. Each of Mina's questions serves to express one of her major concerns. The first asks how to recognize and stimulate growth in writing skills among ill-prepared young adults, the group usually taught as if they were either conventional college students or much younger learners at an earlier stage of development. The second question concerns the ways instruction can help recover lost time because, for these students, academic and economic pressures require rapid mastery rather than slow assimilation of skills. Her third question addresses the ways in which writers gain the attention of an academic audience by mastering qualities of "craftiness" and "cunning" hidden from the inexperienced writer.

Mina calls her final question ("What goes on and what ought to go on in the composition classroom?") "embarrassingly rudimentary," but it is not a question that brings her back to basics in any nostalgic way. Rather its purposes have been defined—with some academic craftiness—by the questions that have preceded it. Each of those questions suggested that the new students have created new issues, making the writing teacher's profession more crucial, but also more exacting. It seems fitting that Mina's final question (and virtually her final message to her colleagues)

asks us to look at ourselves as we are, to think of the new challenges we face, and to seek to bridge the gap between what is and what ought to be. Mina's own work, as much as that of any single individual, furnished preliminary answers to the questions she raised and made many of us reformulate our sense of the academic responsibilities of college writing teachers.