

A PROBLEM IN RHETORIC: TEACHING WRITING WITH WESTERN CULTURE

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But rather than the large theoretical questions of canon revision that grabbed national headlines last year, I want to talk about a more mundane and limited question that I tried to deal with while teaching at Stanford between 1984 and June 1988. That question addresses one of the practical concerns of this conference on core curriculum: how does one effectively combine a course in English Composition with a course in Western Culture?

It was first presented to me in Spring 1984, when I was hired by the English Department to coordinate and teach in its newly designed "track" of the University's required Western Culture survey. After two years of brainstorming and politicking, the Department had received approval to mount a pilot project that would couple an interdisciplinary lecture-discussion course called "Literature and the Arts in Western Culture" with its own freshman writing requirement. Senior professors would deliver three lectures per week to a large group of all the students registered in the track; small groups would subsequently meet in sections to discuss the readings and lectures with non-tenured Ph.D. section leaders, who would also conduct twice-weekly composition classes that used the works treated in Western Culture as the basis for writing assignments. This arrangement would appeal to incoming students as a good deal which got two requirements out of the way in a single eight-unit course, and it would benefit the English Department—by raising its visibility and its FTE, by attracting new majors, and by providing the benefits of large lectures linked with small, writing-intensive classes. The problem delegated to me was to work out a curriculum that would adapt the topics of English Comp to the readings and lectures—a curriculum for a course called Writing With Western Culture.

Since then, the program has received high student evaluations, has quadrupled in size, and, with numerous beneficial modifications, has survived the canon reforms introduced last year. After eight years, the original writing curriculum is still intact. So I think it's appropriate to describe it here in some detail to those dealing with similar problems.

Let me begin with a brief discussion of the theory behind "Writing with Western Culture" and its connection to the classic tradition of rhetorical education. The central idea of the program is combining. First of all, combining the three aspects of the familiar rhetorical trinity: Reading, Writing, and Thinking. A fine

statement of the principle is found on the opening page of *Writing Worth Reading*, a composition textbook by my former Writing Director at Stanford, Nancy Packer:

Writing is part of the continuum of thinking-reading-writing. The quality of all writing . . . will depend on the quality of the thinking on which it is based. To write effectively, students must first learn to think clearly and critically about significant matters. A giant step toward critical thinking is critical reading. When students engage, even challenge a text, their thinking and their writing will improve. The best writing will come from a scrupulous attention to what one reads and what one thinks. As thinking and reading affect writing, so, too, good writing gives rise to better thinking and reading. (vi)

This principle of Integration was already old when formulated by Renaissance Humanist educators like Erasmus and Roger Ascham as *sapientia et eloquentia*—the pursuit of wisdom and eloquence through the study and imitation of the classics. How better to teach the writing skill of paraphrase than to have students produce a precis of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*? How better to learn the reading skills necessary to follow what Plato says about education than to write a summary of it? A consequence of this approach: the student's effort in one course is directly reinforced in the other. How better to teach patterns of coordination and subordination than have students outline passages of Aristotle's *Poetics*? And how better to comprehend and remember that work's seminal ideas than outlining the text—practically an outline in itself?

Now in their dryness, such assignments may sound like relics of the scholastic *trivium*, but in this respect they are atypical. For in addition to integrating reading, writing, and thinking, most of our work in Writing With Western Culture involves combining two other elements: the students' contemporary personal experience and their imitation of major texts—thereby facilitating a process of Interaction. In practicing the skills of description and narration, for example, students draw upon their own immediate perceptions, but model their accounts upon a passage from an epic. One student, Enrique, writes "The Enreid," a story of his passage through the pandemonium of freshman registration that imitates Vergil's account of the shades jostling their way across the river Styx. Jody—now majoring in Art History—paints a verbal picture of a Greek vase in the Stanford Museum, following Homer's depiction of the shield of Achilles. When we come to the personal essay, students imitate Augustine's *Confessions*—beginning with a voyage down the corridors of memory, reconstructing the two voices of a past moral conflict, and concluding with a reflection on the understanding of self

gained through the passage of time. Thus, the students' engagement with the text, driven by the pressure of writing, infuses the flux of their perceptions with meaning, of their feelings with form.

The two processes of combining—Integration and Interaction—are themselves naturally combined. In their own writing, students experience inspiration, frustration and triumph analogous to those experienced by their classical mentors. They discover that the tradition itself is emergent rather than remote, and that they belong to it. When, several weeks after he writes about Stanford undergraduates crossing the Styx, Enrique encounters fourteenth-century Florentines mobbing the same shores in *The Inferno*, he has a flash of identification with Vergil's pupil and a nice appreciation of Dante's craft in imitating *his* master. Now Enrique begins to understand the process of cultural transmission because he has taken part in it himself. And he grasps that the classics imitate one another not only because the great seek illustrious company, but also because their creators—Vergil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Blake—were schooled by the same two methods of combining: Integration and Interaction. For the poets learned the rudiments of their art in courses not about poetry but about rhetoric—alongside their contemporaries who would become priests, politicians or merchants.

One might even say, as Wesley Trimpi and Joel Altman recently have, that the discipline of rhetoric, the art of effective communication, stood at the heart of the traditional educational curriculum, enlivening and drawing upon all the other arts. And one could, with Aristotle, assert that rhetoric teaches the *practical application* of all the other humanities: logic and philosophy; psychology and politics; ethics and jurisprudence; literature, art and music. These are the assumptions embodied in the syllabus of Writing with Western Culture.

In the course syllabus, each week's Western Culture readings and lectures are listed to the left; the corresponding Composition topics and assignments to their right. First quarter moves from invention to arrangement (or organization) then to revision and argument; second quarter builds on those foundations to develop analogous skills of critical research, style (including grammar, punctuation, diction and voice), and persuasion.

We begin at the beginning, with invention—practicing brainstorming, freewriting, meditation, conversation and questioning techniques, placing strongest emphasis on comparison/contrast as an approach to thinking, reading, and writing. After discussing the relation of creation myths to imaginative creation, students write an in-class essay comparing and contrasting Greek and Hebrew cosmogony stories.

The second ungraded writing assignment is a longer essay written at home, further developing comparison/contrast as a mode of invention and discovery. Students contrast the Greek and Hebraic deities and heroes, and then compare the similarities between heroes and deities in Genesis and *The Iliad*.

By the third week, the emphasis shifts from invention to arrangement, the classes focused on limiting a topic and arriving at a thesis. I clarify the nature of a thesis by defining it as a strong sentence and by defining a sentence as an utterance that can be contradicted. The topic of the paper is a dogmatic assertion of the moral of the ending of one of the two plays just read: *Oedipus* and *Lysistrata*.

Week four focuses on the paragraph and on the purely organizational principles of unity, coherence, and adequate development. The concepts of coordination and subordination are examined in relation to topic sentence and supporting material, in relation to clauses within the sentence, and in relation to Platonic forms and their governance of particulars. The writing assignment is the precis of Plato, which must be presented in clearly structured paragraphs, and the outline of Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Arrangement remains the topic of week five; it's developed in connection with the way parts relate to a whole. Vergil's *Aeneid*, the week's Western Culture reading, provides examples of powerful beginnings, endings, transitions, climactic sequences and ingenious interplay between parts and whole. Students write about how specific passages they select exemplify comprehensive themes and motifs discussed in the literature lecture. Selections from papers of previous year's students demonstrate successful use of introductions, conclusions, transitions, and natural points of emphasis.

Assignment 6 follows upon a presentation of techniques of description and narration—sense awareness, dominant impression, suspense and climax—through in-class writing tasks. It opens with a statement of the doctrine of imitation I mentioned earlier, and then it offers students a wide range of choices on how to apply it. Here is a sample from Enrique's "Enreid":

The Pavillion was mountainous, huge and impressive. With dark granite columns that spired towards heaven, it commanded awe and fear in the hearts of mortal freshmen. Defended by a large fence and dense shrubbery, it was as much fortress as temple.

Pushing my way through the pilgrims and common folk that frequented the Pavillion during the Festival of Registration, I swiftly sought the gates of entrance.

All at once the sky was robbed of light and great darkness encompassed the inner hall. Drawing my sword, I made my way down a damp, cold, concrete stairway into the depths of the Pavillion. There before me a whole seething crowd streamed into many small booths and altars—a whirlpool of vast humanity sprawling aimlessly and without direction. Cautiously I made my way onto the floor of the cavernous interior. Then

suddenly an enormous wave of confusion and despair overcame me: a terrible sense of complete isolation amidst so many strangers. . . . Falling on one knee I appealed to the gods once again, "Oh brave and wise ones above, help me in my plight; I must register!"

I don't have time to also quote the Virgilian model that would show the imitative process in action, but notice the vividness of detail, the focus on dominant descriptive impression, the integral use of metaphor and the building of climax, as well as the selection of a true contemporary rite of passage with its elements of death and rebirth. The gamelike quality of imitation, rather than restraining students' power of expression, liberates a creative playfulness and neutralizes the self-consciousness that often inhibits freshman writers.

The next assignment, entitled "Memory and Reflection," is linked to the reading of the Confessions of St. Augustine. It incorporates the most recent lessons on narration and description into an exercise that recapitulates methods of invention and methods of arrangement. Here are some excerpts from a response by Bill called "Major Rager":

I would have loved to go to the "Major Rager," a wild, loud and completely out-of-control party last April, if only it had been held at someone else's house. I still remember scenes from that night vividly; I can see myself running up and down the stairs as more and more unknown faces came through the wide-open doors. I must have appeared frantic, hands pressed tightly against my face, moaning softly and asking, "Who are these people? How did they know about this? Why are they in my home? All my questions went unanswered as the house filled to the bursting point, people spilling outside onto the streets when the mad crush overcame them. Eventually, of course, the sheriffs arrived, attracted by the blare of numerous stereos and the complaints of neighbors. I can still recall the image of two burly figures, silhouetted against the moonlit sky, hurling keg after keg over the side of the second-story balcony in a frantic effort to avoid detection by the law. Bouncing from stone to stone, they rolled down the steep, woody slope to be greeted with open arms by the small army of partiers strategically deployed throughout the underbrush. . . .

Why does this parental love, so complete and unwavering over so many years, seem to fade into insignificance compared to the fleeting friendships of youth? I think that the reason can be found, ironically, in its very permanence and strength. Most of us become accustomed to a home environment filled with mutual support and encouragement and accept

this state as natural and unchanging. It is the human way to take such things for granted, as they are part of the unseen background to our world, ever-present, vitally important, yet virtually unnoticed. Do most people in America ever think about what it means to be hungry and homeless, except when they are reminded by the example of some unfortunate person? In a similar way, I was not really aware of the emotional nourishment my parents gave me every day of my life. It became something I accepted without gratitude, a right to which I was entitled by virtue of my birth, and eventually a relationship which I could use to my own advantage. I imagine that most other people with a happy home life have felt the same way.

Contrast the security in this relationship with the fickle nature of most adolescent friendships. In the high-school social whirl, life is a constant battle to hold on to the friends one has while attracting new ones by whatever means possible. The "bait in the trap," as it were, can be anything from a fancy car or other material possessions to a more subtle approach involving helping with someone's homework or having a large party for one's friends. The latter action is especially effective because it involves an act of rebellion against one's parents. Although this action is clearly an abuse of someone else's property, the sin is an accepted and common one. Even St. Augustine felt pressure to increase his popularity through unsaintly means: "I gave in more and more to vice simply in order not to be despised."

From the modulation of the authorial voice to the ordered presentation of the larger issues growing out of the inner conflict, you can hear the influence of Augustine, both as moralist and as rhetorician. The writer has simply substituted his own parents for God the Father.

From the personal essay, the focus of the course moves to an introduction to argumentation, a division of rhetoric that will continue to occupy students until the end of the course. One of the Western Culture texts for the week is a set of Questions from Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*—a dense, but also an extremely schematic and therefore easily analyzable form of argumentation. The deductive and authority-based nature of the scholastic method gives students a chance to sharpen their purely dialectical skills by learning to argue both sides of the question and to appropriately cite chapter and verse. Here is a sample from Gretchen's essay, "The Dismantling of a Sexist Misconception."

Saint Paul claims that "neither was man created for woman, but woman for man." (I Corinthians 11:9) In order for this to be true, the following

three criteria must be satisfied: God must not have created woman as man's equal, the original relationship between men and women must have been one of subordination, and women must serve as only positive influences on men. I will now examine each of these issues in turn.

The first question raised is whether or not God created women inferior to men. Saint Paul believes that He did simply because "man was not made from woman, but woman from man." (I Corinthians 11:8) But, the fact alone that woman was created from the flesh of man does not justify the inference that woman comes into existence as an underling to man, "for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God." (I Corinthians 11:12) Thus, the reasoning that woman was created subservient to man because she was born of his flesh is false, for man is now born from the flesh of woman.

Using Aquinas' tools, Gretchen performs a surgical dissection of Saint Paul's inferences and premises, and builds her own case with the acuity of the Wife of Bath.

The final assignment of the quarter entitled "Appealing the Last Judgment," again demands the cumulative use of skills. Class discussion has focused on argument that is inductive rather than schematic, and has emphasized the detection of unstated assumptions and consequences rather than purely logical fallacies; the paper therefore combines literary with moral criticism. Here are some passages from a paper by Hassan:

Deep inside the Earth, in the ninth bolgia of the eighth circle of hell, Dante places two of the most virtuous men that ever lived. The founder of Islam, the prophet Mohammed, and his first follower, Ali, are sent down among the sowers of schism and scandal. Mohammed has his body split in half from the crotch to the chin. Ali complements this punishment with his head split from the chin to the crown. . . . Besides the physical grotesqueness of the scene, Dante uses obscene language as he passes judgment on the two. To explain Mohammed's wound, he says, "I saw someone ripped open from his chin to where we fart." To describe Mohammed's vital organs being ripped, he says that "his guts spilled out, with the dirty sack that turns to shit whatever the mouth gulps down." These two examples show Dante's disgust for the two men whom he places in the circle of fraud among many other heretics. . . .

Dante was plagued with the misconceptions that were prevalent in his

time in Europe. Because Islam was such a political threat to Europe as the Saracens in the West had invaded Spain and most of Southern France, and the Ummayyads in the East had destroyed the Byzantine Empire, the Europeans needed a common bond to unite themselves against the enemy. . . .

Mohammed, however, should not be placed in hell at all, for he was a virtuous and holy man. He preached salvation through the will of the omnipotent God. . . . Throughout his life, he tried to live by the will of God, loving his fellow man, giving to the poor, and doing what God demanded of him. He never wanted personal fame nor desired a rise in social class. . . .

My views on this judgment are based partly upon my upbringing as a Muslim. My grandfather, a religious scholar, always told me to follow the example of Mohammed and Ali in obeying God. He always helped me to solve my problems by looking for answers in the Koran. . . . The idea of having Mohammed in hell is absurd and impossible in my set of values, for he is the founder of all that I believe in religiously. Without his dogma, my grandfather's life-time work and belief would be ludicrous. . . . I therefore disagree with Dante's judgment, for it was based on his lack of knowledge about Islam. If he had known the doctrines, he would have at least placed Mohammed and Ali in Limbo among the virtuous pagans if not in Paradise itself, for they still believed in God and led an honest and good life. Although the two religions differ on many points, they both show the way to salvation through God, whether he be called Christ or Allah.

The second quarter opens with a research project and paper—again argumentative in format, and centered around the texts of Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Thomas More's *Utopia*—and also around the critical judgments of commentaries students track down and study. The controversy these works invariably stimulate is heightened in the Western Culture discussion sections, where members of the class debate their positions while in the process of working on their drafts and revisions.

This project lasts for the first four weeks of the quarter. Most composition class time during this period is devoted to grammar, punctuation and mechanics of research and documentation. Those matters lead to the consideration of style—both as tone, diction, figurative language, and as the expression of personal and cultural identity. This topic dovetails with the study of Renaissance poetry and the

century of Louis Quatorze in Western Culture. After they produce an original Shakespearean sonnet, students write a stylistic analysis of the diction of Metaphysical poetry which makes use of their research in the OED.

The last part of Writing With Western Culture is devoted to the topic of Persuasion—or rhetoric and power. In connection with their reading of *Paradise Lost* students analyze the manipulative devices that Satan uses to market his apple and compare them with advertisements, political or religious propaganda and seduction poems. In the last assignment of the course students are required to exercise the eloquence they have analyzed and developed over the last twenty weeks in pursuit of some preselected goal—whether it be the change of an academic or political policy, the favors of a friend, the offer of a job, or the granting of a prayer.

I've been calling your attention to discrete examples, but I'd like to emphasize again that this syllabus aspires toward the same kind of coherence we demand of our students' essays. Adhering to the principles of Integration and Interaction, it moves each quarter from the rhetorical topics of invention, through arrangement and style, to revision, and then persuasion. In students, this repeated movement produces a sense of familiarity and review, and also of progress, as the applications become more inclusive and sophisticated.

The coherence of the syllabus is largely wrought by the intrinsic coherence of the subject matter we study in a survey of the Western Cultural heritage. For despite the immense distances between Homer and Joyce or between Exodus and Ellison, despite the radically opposed perspectives of John Milton and Mary Wollstonecraft or between Frederick Douglass and Frederick Nietzsche, nevertheless they are all engaged with one another in the same conversation—a conversation we and our students only need listen to in order to join.