

Chapter 15. Finishing Graduate School

The two years teaching elementary school were transformative, but I was drawn back to university life, the student role, and the particular writing expectations of academic inquiry. Despite the community protecting my job for two years, I was not renewed—whether for failure as a teacher, or unconventionality, or other transgression I am still not sure. I am also unsure whether my finally gaining a 4F draft status was the result of letters from my therapist and an anti-war medical doctor who identified stress-related ulcers or a sullen dramatic performance at my army medical intended to confirm my therapist's diagnosis. In any event, for the first time I could make life choices free of the draft. I contemplated several options. I did not feel ready or networked enough to make a go of being a writer or actor. I was tempted to continue in elementary education, but I only saw constant struggle against bureaucratic constraints and debilitating conditions of work that would undermine whatever pleasure I could get from connecting with the students. Although I now see that opportunities then existed which would have made elementary teaching possible, I did not see them at the time. Maybe more significantly, I had from an early age never imagined myself as anything other than working within the academic world, though I was often uncertain and confused about which part of that world I would fit into. My imagination of futures was impoverished. Although I was not excited about returning to grad school which had been so dispiriting before, it was familiar, and it was easy to reactivate my matriculation. I figured I would sort things out afterwards.

During my two years away from Brandeis, there was a fortunate change in graduate requirements. The M.A. previously had required only a year of courses and a major text exam, while the Ph.D. had required more coursework and comprehensive exams, followed by dissertation. While I was away, however, under the pressure of a student strike, all the coursework and comprehensive exams were moved to the M.A., and the Ph.D. required only a dissertation. Any work beyond that was to be negotiated with the advisor. Having already received my masters, I needed only to be accepted by an advisor for my dissertation. The no-nonsense Cunningham found my reading list during my hiatus sufficient knowledge of the field for me to go directly to a dissertation. After rooting around the library for a bit I came up with a proposal that pursued a question that had interested me since I was in junior high school: why people wrote books. A microfilm edition of all the books in *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland, and of English Books Printed Abroad 1475–1640* had recently been released. This collection let me escape the blinders of canonical literature to see the full range of what people were writing. I narrowed the focus to 1603, which had double the books of the surrounding

years, because of the death of Queen Elizabeth I and ascension of King James I. I focused on books specifically related to those events. The works were of now canonical authors, such as Ben Jonson and the lesser-known Michael Drayton, as well as authors now no longer recognized or even remembered. The authors represented all classes, and almost all the works were poetic, in eulogy of the deceased queen or celebration of the new king, wending his way from Scotland down to London. All the poems were occasional, a class of poetry that was little studied and little respected but which I found fascinating because they were connected to historical and social events.

One of my first tasks was to understand occasional poetry, about which there was little theory in 1970. When I examined the poetic theory during the Renaissance, I found it barely a explicit category, though there were many examples of poems we would now consider occasional. Using the theory of that time, I identified a variety of terms that were relevant to the kinds of poems I was finding, and examined the implications of those terms for occasional verse. From these terms I constructed a definition. My thirteen-page working paper elaborated each of the terms in the definition from theory and their application to the poems. My advisor suggested this was a way station to understanding, helping me understand what I was looking at and how it differed from my prior expectations of poetry. I did not, however, use any of this definition explicitly in my dissertation, which was a description and catalogue of verse, and a description of the events they fit into. The catalog and description were organized around styles, formal characteristics, and function within the events of the royal transition. These features turned out to correspond to genre, sorted out according to the social class of poet. In the end this social analysis seemed more powerful to understand what I was seeing than the fulfillment of an abstract definition.

This project was novel for me in many respects. First, I was writing about non-canonical literary texts. This meant the focus was not to show appreciation or evaluation of the text. It also took the focus away from interpretation; that is, treating the text as difficult to understand, making the critic's task one of exposing non-obvious meanings or effects. Rather these texts' meanings were readily accessible, even with the historical distance of three and a half centuries.

While I had worked with corpora or collections of texts before, I had organized the analyses along interpretive tasks, considering repertoires of plays or poetic collections. I even took an interpretive stance in considering the letters of a Pope or the transcripts of Congressional hearings. But here the task was more to describe the nature and character of these texts, to place these texts in the society, literary culture, and historical events of the time, explaining what motivated each of these texts and how they functioned in their specific moments. I also noted how styles and genres were inflected by social class and event. I was beginning to work out a sociological, activity-oriented, genre-based analysis which was to guide much of my later work when I turned to consider non-literary works, in different social spheres.

In a sense the novelty of the methods of analyzing this corpus came from taking occasional verse seriously, rather than as a reduced or lower form of poetry, not worthy of literary attention. Taking occasionality seriously posed the problem of what was the occasion—which then led to the question of what was happening historically, who were the participants in their social positions and roles, and what the poet was trying to accomplish in the circumstances with the available and expected forms of communication. I was led, step by step, to learn new ways of dealing with, describing, and organizing the material in the corpus. The theory to come from this orientation was not well developed or explicitly articulated in the dissertation. Rather the implications appeared in the close-to-the-ground description and organization of the over 100 texts, from which I quoted extensively, with full texts of some of the more interesting poems that had not been republished in over 360 years. I was still trying to harness this study to the literary task of recovering worthy texts with an extensive historical contextualization.

Cunningham was a deep and demanding influence on me. He was a person of few words and one gained his respect by saying only the few, necessary things. I was most proud when he said that he thought my dissertation should have ended with “Q.E.D.” (*Quod erat demonstrandum*—which was to be demonstrated), the traditional end of a math proof. I thought of my dissertation as a kind of truth poem, deserving of the same care with language and aiming at the same intensity of communication and immediacy expected in poetry. Here, however, everything had to be grounded in evidence, and to expand our understanding of realities. This idea of “truth poem” was to become a mantra of mine in years to follow.

I wrote some poems during this time on the experience of writing a dissertation and my relationship to Cunningham. I include a few lines of one here because they reflect his influence on my writing and scholarship.

I move to what I fear,
 My outer limit of confusion.
 Beyond the glassy sphere
 Of my self, for invitation
 A teacher breathes, hard and tired,
 A ghost of knowledge transposed.
 By his breath, the glass is shattered.
 What I know is recomposed.

In this experience I see a foreshadowing of how I was later to come to understand Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, a period of puzzling supported and guided by someone with fuller understanding, culminating in a moment of development when inchoate parts reorganize into a new coherence (see Vygotsky, 1978 and Bazerman, 2009c).

I managed to finish the dissertation in one year, so my contact with graduate training was limited. I used to joke that I wasn't in grad school long enough to be ruined by it. Even more, during the fall term I still lived in Brooklyn, driving up to Waltham one day a week to consult with Cunningham and sit in on his seminar. In the spring, when I was finishing typing up the dissertation on my deteriorating portable typewriter, I moved to Waltham where I met another of his advisees who became my life partner. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, at that time an international student from Malaysia, is also a writer—of poetry, fiction, and academic work. We do have somewhat different views of writing and even perceptions of the influence of our shared advisor on us, yet we understand the practical needs and moods of writers and have been able to organize our lives around this. Through her work and her academic and writing networks in Asia (Malaysia, Singapore, then Nepal and Hong Kong) I expanded my view of writing and writing education beyond the borders of the US. These experiences opened me to the value of other international experiences as over the years I also made connections with the teaching of writing and writing studies in Europe and Latin America.

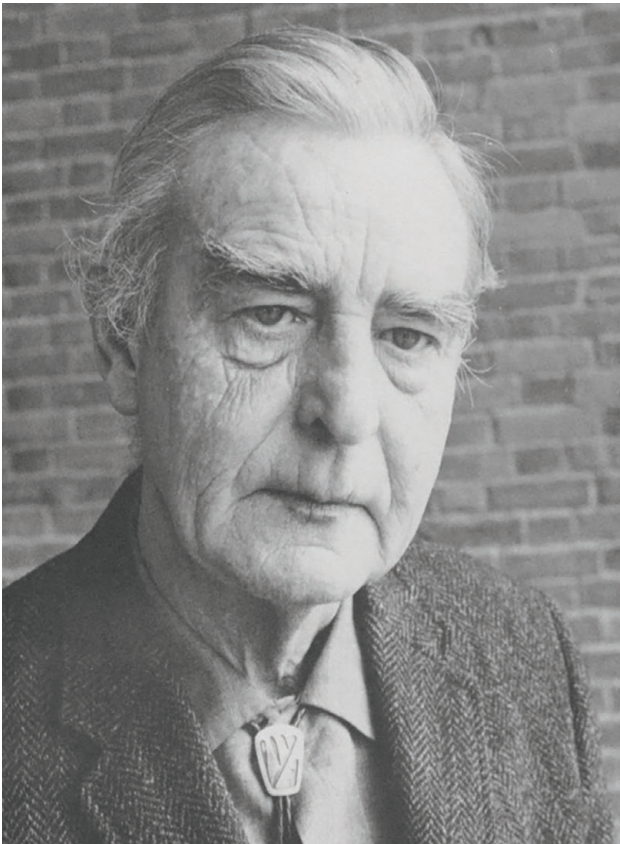


Figure 15.1. James V. Cunningham. Photo by Thomas Victor