

Appendix. Poesis: Making Papers

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This is not an academic paper; I revert to an older, more conversational style of raising some questions with you.¹ Let me claim the genre “essay,” if not in the manner of Montaigne, at least with the tone of bemused speculation.

When I first started coming to meetings of the CCCC, we all lived in an Edenic world of conversations. We had diverse backgrounds—mostly built on a literary base—but we were drawn to NCTE and had large loads of composition students. We had practical problems to solve and wanted to know what others were doing. Indeed, our journal was primarily a record of our conversations. It was not unlike what now appears on the WPA email listserv.

At the time I was running a program of technical writing in a college of engineering, really just a pair of required junior-senior courses. I was the only tenure-track person; the other teachers were graduate students, mostly from the Iowa Writers Workshop and mostly poets. I was not allowed to hire new assistants until after registration was complete and enrollment was certified. To finesse the problem, I had a deal with Paul Engle, who never had enough aid for aspiring writers, to identify Writers Workshop graduate students who were able and who might relate to engineering students. Late on Wednesday I’d call him, saying, “I need X number of assistants,” and Paul would send up X plus a few, and I’d pick my needed number to sit in the back of the classroom on Thursday and start teaching the following Tuesday. Oddly enough, the system worked quite well. Why?

Sometimes the writers did have specifically useful backgrounds: pre-med, factory work, military assignments, law degrees, even engineering degrees. But mostly the useful quality was that they believed in poesis, making things with words, the very root of poetry. In the 1940s and 50s poets were crafty, like blacksmiths and shoemakers and engineers. Even if they weren’t bardic or courtly, they believed that poems were made. I recall coming on Phil Levine in his engineering cubicle writing trimeters. He said he had been writing a lot of iambic pentameters of late and needed to break out of the mold. Levine obviously had themes and ideas, and later critics have made much of them, but his concern was technique. Our sculptors shaped in steel and stone; our composers ordered sounds; our writers disciplined words and sentences.

1. A version of this essay was presented at a panel on “Composition, Creative Writing, and the Pedagogy of Craft” at the 1997 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Phoenix. It was published in *Writing on the Edge* Vol. 8, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 1997): 40-46.

This state of mind suited engineering students. They too made things. Scientists speculated, but engineers built. They built bridges—not metaphorical ones to the twenty-first century—but real ones from shore to shore. They made television sets, permeable membranes, traffic interchanges—and could be made to see that reports and contracts and instruction manuals are things to be made. They could even imagine that sentences had raw materials that had to be shaped, and the poets could relate to that. A few of the poets and a few of the engineers could be drawn into speculation about language, but people of neither group really wanted to be linguistic scholars, except incidentally. They wanted reports and poems that, like bridges, would carry the assigned load. They wanted the joints to hold.

I don't mean to suggest that these people were unaware that language exists in a world of people. Poets of that generation knew that great poets require great audiences because *Poetry* magazine reminded them, and they wanted at least the editor-as-audience to respond. These writers aspired to professional status and learned early about markets for their work. Great themes were fine, but competence was essential. I recall a now much-honored poet who was extremely sympathetic to the civil rights movement, even participated in a mild way, but who sniffed at the work of a poet of the movement—"Just a street poet"—because he saw only emotion, not craft, in the poems. The audience these poets sought respected craft.

Engineering students accepted the idea that writing was supposed to cause an effect in some other person, but they tended to imagine that all other persons were like the one they saw in the mirror. Fortunately, seniors had acquired specialties that created sub-audiences, so within a classroom they encountered "otherness" in a form they could respect. All of the engineering students could agree on the importance of well-crafted work. The poet-instructors, who were much aware of how their own careers depended on "others," had but a small leap to make in encouraging students to adapt to even less similar audiences, like the people in marketing or accounting or management. Maybe even clients.

You may see where my fragment of a narrative is leading. Poets and engineering students alike *had* their subject matter—they took it for granted. They *had* their audiences, even though they tended overly much to think that those audiences shared all of their world. They knew their authority for speaking, their identity. It just happened that facing each other they sometimes thought they shared none of these assumptions about subjects, otherness, or selfhood. They were just fellow strangers possessing alien kinds of knowledge being forced to do something together. They did believe in form, and to make the best of an awkward social situation they could demonstrate to each other how the other variables are revealed in form. Let me give an example to add flesh to that abstraction.

Our students operated a magazine of semi-technical articles they had written for classes. Few were making serious "contributions to knowledge," but they were assembling information about what industries and researchers were developing, so they had real news to report. It was technical journalism intended for people who were committed to technology but who lacked information beyond their

own special interests. That audience may in fact be merely the “general reader,” but the more limited term allowed us to deal emphatically with their problems of adapting vocabulary, illustrations, and reasoning to people unlike themselves.

At that time engineering-student readers and writers for our magazine were almost all males, *young* males. They thought *Playboy* was daring and exciting, and they wanted to put pin-ups in their magazine. Aside from explaining to them that engineers were not necessarily male, we could point out that the role of engineer was sexless, that gender was an irrelevant characteristic of the audience. They should not want to distract that audience by playing to animal drives not related to the technical subjects at hand. They should not want to muddle their own role as a technical authority by emphasizing their interests out of working hours.

In a rhetorical sense we were able to discuss self-identity as a construct, as something made. For English majors we might adapt Kenneth Burke and talk about it as though it were creating consistent roles in a play or a dramatic monologue or, for that matter, a simple lyric. For these student engineers it had to do with their aspirations, with learning to act like the best engineers. Most of them had come to believe in reliable design made economically to be useful in some particular set of circumstances. If you could show them how language demonstrated those virtues to others, they would struggle with the necessary craft, even as they struggled with calculus or the laws of motion.

The issue of “making an audience” was harder to sell. Even then, journalists were caught up in-market analysis, in discovering audiences. They assumed the readers had needs and limits of knowledge and perception, they could discover such needs and limits, and they could craft language to address them. Catering to such views we could effectively discuss whether one should turn a knob “to the left” or “counter-clockwise,” whether it made any difference that the knob itself was “serrated” or “knurled,” or whether the manager authorizing expenditures needed to know that there was a knob at all. We could send students to city council meetings to observe engineers trying to explain why a traffic signal would be a hazard even though the neighborhood folks thought it was essential. That is, practical writers like rhetoricians of old thought of audiences as people with pre-existing collections of motives to be moved from one intellectual place to another by reasonable information, roused emotions, or personal authority. And we were willing to play to that set of beliefs. I guess most of the time we shared it.

Still, literary writers have an obligation to make audiences. We sometimes tell our literature students that they must make themselves into “fit readers” of Shakespeare or Milton or Wordsworth. And we promise them that if they make the effort to belong to those worlds in language and fact, the poets will reward them with insight. We even claim that by becoming a fit reader, one enlarges oneself and becomes a person with greater possibilities. Literary language, the language beyond daily commerce with neighbors, makes us more than we were, not so much by increasing our knowledge as by providing a different way of seeing the world around us.

Sometimes it is easier to understand how Picasso, say, taught us how see differently, or Strindberg how to hear differently. We may like to remind people that J. S. Mill, a great logician and philosopher, thought he had lost his mind when he first read William Wordsworth because Wordsworth made demands of a new craft on the reader—craft we now think so ordinary that we relegate Wordsworth to literature for adolescents. Engineers may understand how their developments—say, the atom bomb or the interstate highway system—can re-structure the world they live in without quite recognizing that their detached manner of addressing audiences also re-shapes human relationships. It leads to a belief in mega-deaths, for example. I suggest that most of us would be happier in our literary roles if a generation or two of critics had not so admired technical and scientific prose.

I have been implying a common attitude toward form and design shared by poets and engineers as the basis for their becoming comfortable with each other over the course of a semester. Let me now turn that proposition over to suggest why it often has been counter-productive, and let me start with an example from literary criticism.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there existed a group of critics loosely identified as “sonnet legislators.” They knew sonnets had 140 syllables, alternately unstressed and stressed, spaced in ten syllable lines, grouped either in three stanzas of four lines and one couplet or in one octave and one sestet. They also had rules for rhyming, assonance, caesurae, alliteration, thematic development, and more. One critic, as I recall, had 1028 acceptable rhyme patterns. Their rules made them eliminate Milton and Wordsworth, Meredith and Rossetti, and many others we consider strong sonneteers. They would not have accepted Hopkins, although two-thirds of his poems are sonnets, and they’d have raged at E.E. Cummings, whose body of work is perhaps one-third made of sonnets. That is, their formalistic rules required them to condemn poems we may well honor. A few apologetically admitted at they saw good poems that were bad sonnets, but that was exceptional broad-mindedness.

My poet friends of the 1940s and 50s who were writing sonnets and sestinas, rondeaus and rondels, epigrams and epithalamia fortunately did not know about the legislators, so they varied the original forms to suit their fancy. The prescribed forms of versification offered resistance that kept them alert and demanded all of their talents, but they felt free to adapt and to build on the tradition. They were so crafty that many readers didn’t even notice the craft or the basic form. By creating variations on the established moves they were becoming the Michael Jordans for the poetic world in spite of the critics, who are now mercifully unknown.

Classroom composition has not always worked out so well. We were, in the early days of CCCC, distracted by the “Minimum Essentials” movement that dealt almost entirely with scribal correctness and social conventionality. Three “errors” and the paper fails. The five-paragraph theme, which has its roots in Aristotle and Cicero, simplified composition in a school classroom, but lost its connections with purpose and audience. The formula was easy to enact, and it could

be elaborated into rules that required “the first sentence to state the subject with a predication that limits the paper, the second sentence to offer definitions, and the third sentence to list the contents of the following three paragraphs.” And so on. It could be written by students who had no purpose other than obliging the teacher and getting out of school, and it allowed teachers a form of quick checking as a substitute for real reading.

In short, it denied what form was really supposed to provide, control for the writer’s vision. It was a parody of craft, of poesis. It also made life tolerable for high school teachers who had 150 pupils a day and practically no time for preparation. And at the same time, Rudolf Flesch and Robert Gunning offered readability formulae that reduced adaptation for audiences to a matter of arithmetic. Both business and journalism paid big bucks to hire their consulting services. Flesch also did rather well telling us why Johnny couldn’t write. To some extent the system was revived by E. D. Hirsch and his “relative readability.” “Correctness” and “formulas” seemed to the public to represent orderliness and a suitable submission to the boss, so they had and still have public approval.

Such perversions of form led to overstatements of contrary positions. I recall people waving Ken Macrorie’s *Uptaught* like Mao’s little red book in order to energize a countermovement that stressed personality, ethical proof. Walker Gibson and Albert Guerard pushed the idea of voice as an expression of self, although with Gibson especially it implied an ontology of relativism, and with the people at Stanford it was more a matter of style. In England James Britton and others pulled together the ideas of various psychologists and linguists to suggest a “self” that is a product of language. The fights over Webster’s Third, Black English Vernacular, and social class were also arguments about the mutability of language as well as about the special purposes of alternate forms—alternate in the sense of allowing crafty choices and styles, in suggesting social allegiances and values.

The people I’ve named were not responsible for the overstatements, but some uncritical readers overstated the case. It was rather like current fights about “whole language” and “phonics.” The people who actually did the research are generally quite calm and reasonable, but supporters sometimes roar out “all or none.” True faith leads to all sorts of false claims and outrageous attacks, and the general public in this cynical age tends to run with the people who view with the noisiest alarm. Oddly enough, people also buy the silliest nostrums, probably because they have learned to distrust the people they are presumed to trust.

You’ll note that I haven’t been saying that teaching craft is the only way to go. It’s a blue-collar kind of approach to our trade, requiring lots of hand labor and apprenticeships, and we suffer enough from fellow academics who seem to think we rank lower than the part-time clerks in the registrar’s office. True cabinetmakers do fine work, but they don’t make many slogans.

In my own academic context at Iowa, the rules that were established to protect the high prestige of the creative writing program (as well as studio art and performance music) also made it possible to develop a program for a broader range

of writers. Journalists came to our courses as well as poets, graduates as well as freshmen, biologists as well as literary critics. They all came to perfect their crafts; we claimed that the craft we offered allowed them better to define themselves as crafters, to govern their own materials, and to relate to the rest of the human world. Our craft, we said, is as complicated as life itself and it engages any question a human can care to ask. We remain the most liberating of all the liberal arts. At times we have been denied by the National Endowment for Humanities, either because they claim we are “mere” mechanics or “mere” rhetoricians, or worse, incompetent therapists, public relations hacks, and badly trained philosophers. I prefer to classify us as poets, primeval makers, enabling the culture to know itself and connect its people into a productive wholeness.