16 Pig Tales: Literature Inside the Pen of Electronic Writing

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I have two stories to tell you. One is about pigs, the other about bewitchment. My museum-director husband has a penchant for garage sales. "Just collecting the material folk culture," he claims when I razz him, but the gold elongated porcelain pig candle holder that sits on the back of our piano, Liberace-style, squeals on him. We may start out on a five-mile run on a spring morning but almost always end up following the flags directing us to another lawn sale, another purchase of old Mason Proffit record albums, a collection of Louis L'Amour western novels, or, if he's lucky, a true find like the Green River knife he discovered in a "buck grab box" a few years back, the seller, no doubt, mistaking it for a rusty kitchen knife.

The other story, the one about spells, is my own story. When I was a new teacher of literature, I felt that if we could *think* enough about literature, we would come to *know* it. In those earlier years, students and I charted the elements of plot, delineated static and dynamic characters, and counted out iambs. With the writing-across-the-curriculum movement to make even literature courses writing intensive, I encouraged my students to write often in order to think, in order to know. To a degree, my methods worked. By writing journals, by responding to entrance and exit prompts, by writing letters to characters, students grew more able to interpret and appreciate the novels, poems, short fiction, and drama we studied. But in recent years I have come to feel that this is not enough, this kind of knowing. I share Dan Morgan's (1993) belief that literature interprets life and that "the greatest literature is about *how to be*" (492). How can I know a person if my only entrance to the knowing is through my thinking? How do I anticipate his laughter? How can I finger the edges of his soul? How can I know him unless I feel him, breathe him in—in short, become so engaged with him that I am enchanted? And how can I know literature, alive and energetic, unless I am similarly enthralled?

Terry Tempest Williams (1994) tells us "writing becomes an act of compassion toward life, the life we so often refuse to see because if we look too closely or feel too deeply, there may be no end to our suffering. But words empower us,

move us beyond our suffering, and set us free. This is the sorcery of literature" (57). To this I would add that in interacting with the text through electronic writing, students also empower themselves to feel literature pulsing through their veins, truly knowing it, cognitively and emotionally. Only a few of my students, usually those already bewitched by the page, experienced this level of knowing when our writing took place on paper alone.

What does the sorcery of literature have to do with the tale of the pig? Just this. In what I call department-store writing, journal writing is kept as safely apart from feeling passion as women's lingerie is distanced from men's boxer shorts; the price of the page is as fixed to academic language as is the price of plaster pigs in the china department, neither of them open for haggling; and the overly familiar format of essays in print and teacher-determined prompts restricts what we will find within the margins as much as coupons restrict which size cereal box we may buy on sale. In the garage-sale nature of virtual spaces, however, students may find greater opportunity for reaching beyond buying off the rack into writing which so inhales the lives within literature that they feel their hearts race. Like garage-sale buyers who may have some idea of what they hope to purchase beforehand but are quite flexible as to what they actually bring home, writers using e-mail, networked software, and MOOs are freed to explore the bargain boxes of literary interpretation with one another online, emerging with the greatest find of all, a nearly inebriating sense of knowing, of living what they have read. Sellers who had no intention of parting with the lawn chair may, on impulse, barter it away right out from underneath themselves at the first inquiry of "how much?", just as students writing in electronic landscapes are prone to read, write, and learn what they may have otherwise kept safely locked in interior storerooms marked "not for sale." When neighbors shop on a neighbor's lawn, even the roles of buyer and seller may turn on the head of a dime; when students write in the virtual lawn, they may join with authors to become co-authors of literature itself. Perhaps it is this openness to expectation that conjures internalized ways of knowing. One is never quite sure what to expect when walking up the driveway.

By Paper Alone

Before crossing the threshold into electronic media for writing about literature, I had always assigned traditional, safe, department-store journals and writing assignments. "Write journal entries to Antigone expressing whether you agree or disagree with her decisions in the play" or "Describe Vonnegut's writing style," or "Reveal the secrets the unicorn knows about Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*." Although such assignments encouraged students to analyze their readings and to think both critically and creatively about them, I was always dissatisfied with the distance from literature exhibited in their writing, the sense

of "jumping through hoops" to please me, the teacher. They wrote to think about literature, but not to know it as organic, as alive. I longed for them to hear characters' voices, to feel the heartbeat of the complex lives they were reading, as well as to sense the soul in a writer's style.

When Internet access and other computing technology became available on our campus outside of the computer science and science departments, I wondered if this might be a way for us to cross over from the tidy rows of compartmentalized thinking into the messier but fuller piles and heaps. My late-night jaunts through the campus computer lab had shown me another side of the students who appeared in my literature classes with eyes at half-mast, intellectually flaccid, unable to catch the wind of enthusiasm over literary lives I attempted to blow their way. But on chat lines and the Internet near midnight, they were at full throttle, eyes aglow, hooting excitedly about discoveries they'd come upon while surfing the Web. Clearly they caught the waves on this ocean with much greater alacrity and energy than they did in the classroom. If I could use this medium in teaching literature, I reasoned, we might really sail.

Getting Wired

The first time I used computers to assist in teaching literature was with an Approaches to Literature class of twenty-three honors level first-year and sophomore students. Clarke is a small private college where interactive learning is strongly promoted and students are accustomed to small-group work in a relaxed atmosphere where most faculty, students, and administrators are on a first-name basis. Classes like this general education course are intrinsic to the core of the liberal arts focus even in professional programs like physical therapy and nursing. In these earlier years, however, few classes outside of the computer science, math, and science departments used computers for course work other than for word processing. The Approaches to Literature course was divided into three units—drama, short fiction, and poetry. Students had written traditional paper journals during the drama unit, but even with this class of bright, motivated students, the writing seemed as bound as the spiral wire holding their entries together. Although they sometimes traded and read one another's journal entries or wrote to other audiences like mayors, newspaper editors, or literary characters, I was their main reader. With e-journals, however, their audience would be the entire class, and each of them would become a reader. After teaching them e-mail, I formed them into one large online discussion group and required them to write three to four times per week about the current reading "in place of regular journals." They sent these posts to all classmates and to me.[1]

The initial entries in the e-mail journals were similar to entries in their paper journals—students constructed interpretations without interacting with the lit-

erature. Perhaps this was because they had written notebook journals at first or perhaps it was because I labeled the writing "e-journals." But then it is entirely possible that students new to this electronic writing format just needed time to become accustomed to its immediate audience, its capability for dialogue, and the opportunity for recursive reading and responding.

Slowly they became more aware of an audience beyond just the teacher, however. In discussing T. Coraghessan Boyle's "Greasy Lake," one of the students[2] offered a provocative challenge to his classmates:

> *Jack*: I disagree with what Ellen says about the narrator from "Greasy Lake" being a jerk just because he tried to rape a girl. Though I do not condone rape, I don't think you are justified in saying that he is a jerk just because he was doing this. This young man and his friends were quite high, drunk and in any other state alcohol or drugs could possibly put someone in. His actions were being determined by the drugs, they were really not his own. If you want to say he is a jerk because he uses drugs, that's fine, but it's unfair to say he is a jerk for actions he is not directly responsible for.

Jack's entry caused a stir with his classmates, most of them young women. Not only did two of the students stop me in the hall that day—"Katie, you have got to see what Jack wrote on e-mail today. You won't believe it!"—but word spread fast among them, and the number of entries multiplied rapidly. Immediately, others posted to discuss an issue they related to their own lives:

> *Patricia*: Jack, I cannot believe you do not think that the guy in Greasy Lake is not a jerk. It does not matter if the man is sober or not, rape is rape. I hope your opinion changes. I know this is an ethical issue and probably doesn't belong in this journal, but I think it is to important to ignore, especially in this day when women have a right not to be victimized.
>
> *Ellen*: First off, I agree with Patricia. Anything you put into your body is YOUR responsibility. I suppose killing someone with your car while drunk does not deserve indictment or imprisonment? Compare him to Sammie in A&P. Sammie has the hots for those girls but he doesn't go out and try to rape them!

Haggling over a character's ethics engaged students emotionally with one another and with the text, even though at first they felt unsure about becoming so involved, wondering whether this was even an acceptable topic to discuss in an academic forum. Out in the garage-sale world of cyberspace without the neat price tags and tidy sales clerks—without the verbal and physical cues of the teacher—they were left to negotiate thinking and writing independently. But with Jack's challenge before them, they plunged into what Michael Basseches (1989) calls "metapositions," places outside the typically accepted confines of academic writing (28). Certainly their writing in direct response to Jack's pinprick was far different than if I had coaxed them to "write about how you feel about the attempted rape." Students returned to the story to find textual evidence to

support their comments about the narrator, something they had not attended to earlier despite my usual English teacher incantation, "Please use textual evidence to support your assertions." Purpose? They wrote to change the thinking of their classmates. Audience? They wrote to people they perceived as "real" rather than just to a teacher who, they believed, already knew it all, an audience Fulwiler (1987) so adroitly labels as "no audience at all" (50). As a result, they walked alongside characters, hand in hand. After a few weeks of this discussion, Jack confessed:

> *Jack*: This is my formal apology to all of you for something I did. My comments about the narrator from Greasy Lake were not true. I do not think he was justified in what he did. But I wanted to see what would happen if I threw a wrench into the works of our discussion. Thank you for not taking pot shots at me personally because of my words. I apologize if I offended anyone, but I am not sorry I did this. WATCH OUT in the future! You never know when I (or someone else) will do this again.

Along with students who knew Jack well, I had wondered about his initial inflammatory posting since it was so out of character for this young man known for his gentle spirit and straight-as-an-arrow lifestyle. Some had even wondered if writing on e-mail had changed Jack. We were relieved to find Jack was still the Jack we had come to know; yet we learned a powerful lesson about e-mail's ability to whip up a controversy and enliven writing by providing an audience engaged by more than just impressing a teacher who would grade the journal.

By interacting socially online to develop interpretation, students moved to interacting socially with the text. They saw their writing delight and agitate other students in ways they perceived as more real, more lively than merely writing *about* literature as students outside the experience between the pages. Thus, as they inhaled literature, they exhaled meaning-making collaboratively through e-journals.

Re-wiring

Although this was a fairly successful project, I realized that I would need to make changes in the e-journal assignment next course around. The whole-class discussion left students with enormous amounts of e-mail. Confusion as to who had said what (fairly common in e-mail conversations) was compounded by the large-group format which made it easier for some students to hide, or "lurk," by refraining from writing. Since our classes are relatively small and students are used to small-group work, smaller e-journal groups made good sense. In the next go-round I arranged e-journal groups of five or six; these smaller groups are more manageable for students, with fewer entries to respond to, and they encourage further depth in exploring texts. Although students had fewer entries

to read, I still read all their entries and was included on the mailing list for all groups. Of course, they were aware I was "listening in."

I also felt that the initial virtual garage-sale writing project, which occurred entirely outside of class time, was not holistically enough blended with class-period activities. In subsequent literature courses, I encouraged more spillover from e-journals into class and back again. For example, in a later class, role-playing activity from the drama unit flowed into the e-journals. In class, students had assumed the roles of characters like Minnie Wright (*Trifles*), Mommy (*Sandbox*), and Titania (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Although their e-journals had been less interactive than the honors class entries had been the year before, their classroom role-playing was lively, perhaps attesting to different learning styles; they engaged in thinking more analytically, deciding what a character should answer to a given question. Following the success of this in-class activity, I reshaped their outside-of-class journal writing, requiring that each student sign up to "become" one of the characters from the drama unit. During the fiction unit, then, they were to write *as* that character about the stories assigned.

Because I borrowed from their in-class success but shifted from the oral mode to one of writing, students took on literature by taking on voices other than their own. As these personas, students not only had to consider what the current short story reading meant, but also what their own persona thought about that story. As they responded to one another, they added yet another layer of thinking; as their personas, they had to engage with other personas in talking about a third set of characters and stories.

The more students spoke in the voice of their assumed roles, the more interactively they engaged with other voices and with the stories—and yet progress was slow at first. Within a few weeks, however, they came upon two real Green River knives. The first surfaced when Rita decided not only to think like Shakespeare's Titania, but also to sound like her as she wrote about Kate Chopin's "The Storm":

> *Rita* (as Titania):
> Shame on Calixta and Alcee'
> For they committed adultery.
> I don't agree with either one,
> Even if they had tons of fun.
>
> Poor Bobinot, Bibi,
> Clarisse, and baby.
> They don't deserve'st such dishonesty.
> I'm sure they hold trust for thee.
>
> The damage done is permanent now.
> Continue, they may not know how.
> Responsibilities are well on their way
> But things will get harder day by day.
>
> Hope is in the air,
> I know they still care.

Although she did not use perfect sonnet form, Rita became more sensitive to Shakespearean style than had any of the students during the study of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* a month earlier. As Meredith Sue Willis (1993) suggests, this imitation of text allowed Rita to "write her way into literature" (127). With her approval, I forwarded to the entire class the sonnet she had posted to her small group. Others soon began writing more carefully, attending to word choice, sentence length, and rhythms from the original text. They were playing and loving the pitch and timbre of their characters' speech. This was distinctly different than the meaningless charting and identifying they had done when students wrote about style and submitted it to me. Obviously, too, rather than simply dropping the first part of the course as "done," they were carrying along with them the full shopping bags of literature gleaned from earlier weeks.

The second treasure surfaced when Tom as Daddy in Albee's *Sandbox* wrote about Sammy (John Updike's "A&P" narrator); Krysta, as Daddy's wife, responded to him:

> *Tom* (as Daddy): This "A&P" story reminds me of my first job and how I met Mommy. Like that boy at the counter, I was hard at work stocking shelves at the local Dominick's. Mommy came in and was arguing with the manager and practically every employee there because she felt the sales price on the melons wasn't marked down very much and "a sale was a sale so things should be cheaper." Somehow I caught her eye and she came up to me and said that if I was gonna support someone like her, I better quit and get a real job. Of course, how could I turn down that kind of offer. And now look at me! Too bad that Sammy kid never connected with that girl in the halter top.
>
> *Krysta* (as Mommy): AAAAARRRRRRH! Daddy, you can't even remember a damn thing! That wasn't me you met in the grocery. Musta been in your dreams. Now listen here to me. That kid in the store was a fool. It was just all lust. He was hot for that girl and couldn't stand it when his boss kicked her out of the store. He was a fool to give up a good job. You have to be realistic in this world. When something like this happens, you have to look the other way. So don't get any ideas, Daddy, about getting all soft and getting "principles" at this point in the game or you may find YOUR dinner in a bowl under the stove!

Krysta and Tom not only imitated Albee's writing in Mommy's craggy voice and Daddy's placating tones, but also spontaneously interacted with each other online, extending the original text. They reached beyond "revisionist literature" (Willis 1993, 133) by adding to Albee's manuscript, suggesting what *could have been*, thus co-creating the text with the playwright. They became both seller and buyer, breathing new life into Albee's characters and relating their experiences to those of Updike's narrator. And they managed all of this without any prompt or teacher intervention.

Not only did we accomplish a more holistic blending of writing inside and outside of class when role-playing took center stage in the e-mail groups, but daily lessons and assignments on paper were changed by the e-journals. Occa-

sionally in class students would respond to discussion prompts as well. "I'm going to speak first as my e-mail persona and then as myself"; or they would comment, "Jordan, this doesn't sound like you. This sounds more like that character Jim Sieg in *Madras*." They also took more initiative in shaping their own learning, requesting that writing assignments be changed to more fully explore in multiple-draft formal essays certain issues raised briefly in the e-journals. No longer content to purchase the advertised specials, they bargained for and negotiated their learning. And I became more sensitive to opportunities arising out of students' online writing to re-route according to the paths they were choosing. In my upper division Science Fiction course, I found a student asking others in her e-mail group, "Can you imagine if Neal Stephenson had written 'Cinderella'?" Following her cue, I asked students to brainstorm the differences between science fiction and fantasy genres and then to write, revising either "Cinderella" or "King Midas" in the style of cyberpunk. Cindy's response was typical of what others wrote:

> She had a friend by name of Fairly Gigmother who worked for the Mafia and had invited her to a Mafia party in the Metaverse pavilion. Anyone who was anyone would be there. With F. G.'s help, she designed a new avatar out of an old word processor program and a Donky Kong video game. She knew Big Al and her slimy co-workers would be there. F. G. told Cyberella that she had to be out of the metaverse by midnight because they would cut the power to the Laundromat she lived in at 12 and the computer would shut down.

This was a far more engaging way to approach literary style than my originally planned assignment to "describe the style of cyberpunk comparing it to other genres." Certainly students could have transformed the style of one story into that of another on paper, but the essence of this experience was that the student created the assignment altogether because the e-journal put her brainstorming conversations with others online. Students knew that their user identification appeared on their e-mail posts, yet there seemed to be more ease in assuming other voices, other personas in this medium. Just as Jack posted an entry contrary to his own feelings about rape and just as Rita mimicked the language patterns of Titania, these science fiction students were immediately comfortable shifting style when writing one another in e-mail. Through the electronic writing, then, students claimed more of a voice in forming their own learning. Although others teaching without computer support may undoubtedly be more imaginative in assigning writing than I was, I found that the dialogical student-student writing encouraged by the presence of electronic writing elicited a flexibility in me as teacher and in each student as learner-teachers.

In referring to a Freirean agenda for the learning process, Ira Shor (1987) notes that in the problem-posing classroom, teachers need to move between the "art of intervention and the art of restraint" (23). The dynamic nature of dia-

logue between students with the teacher as eavesdropper encouraged such movement. I was privy to their shopping—observing which items they were picking up, testing the weight of in their palms, turning over to see prices on the underside, chatting to one another about in considering whether or not to buy. And because their needs were immediately apparent in the e-journals (rather than being something I realized only upon reading their paper journals at the end of a unit), I could adjust responses and assignments accordingly. I could more easily pace my intervention and feel more secure about my restraint.

Journals on e-mail, read daily rather than only four to five times per semester, encouraged an immediate sense of audience and purpose; there was also an immediate sense in students of writing regularly rather than dashing off entries in various colors of ink the night before the journals were due. Yes, in my classes previous to e-journal, students had written letters to one another of an interpretive nature and we had found, as Toby Fulwiler (1987) suggests, that "when students write to one another, rather than to teachers, a certain pretension necessarily drops away" (51). The e-journal, however, established that which was lacking in paper notebooks; through the ongoing dialogue where no entry is complete until it is "sent" emerged that community of writers Peter Elbow so often mentions as key to thinking and writing in the composition classroom.

Responding to other treasures unearthed from accidental circumstance has also worked well in literature classes using networked software other than e-mail. One of our best finds at our virtual garage-sale writing occurred one day in class when students responded with complete confusion when I asked them to orally discuss "Harrison Bergeron," the short story assigned for that day; it turned out that their text was missing two crucial pages. Fresh from having given a workshop to faculty about using prediction in journal writing in science classes, I suggested we write through the networked synchronous software hypothesizing what the missing pages included. Unlike the more linear oral class discussions where students wait for one another to finish speaking before speaking themselves, synchronous online writing gives each student a writing space to express her views even before hearing those of others. Upon cue from the teacher, she "sends" her writing to the network, which puts it on all student screens in first-come, first-served order, like a transcript of a conversation. Although students could have written their guesses in paper journals before discussing as a class, thus maintaining initial independent thinking, it is unlikely this approach would have worked as well for all students. Some, upon hearing ideas they deemed "more correct" from classmates who spoke first, may have chosen not to share their own ideas. They could have traded and read such paper journals, but chances are they would not have had access to everyone's writing; and then there is also the problem of wrestling with penmanship.

In the early minutes of written discussion on the day we discussed "Harrison Bergeron," hypotheses represented wild first thoughts:

> *Seymour*: What happened in the missing pages? Sort of reminds me of Nixon's elusive 18 minutes. I'll bet Harrison and the ballet dancer leaped out of the TV studio and took over the government.

As the discussion continued, students questioned how textually based their original guesses had been and kneaded the parts of the text they had read into, giving rise to those parts that had been missing.

> *Samantha*: Vonnegut says that handicaps were directly proportionate to physical and mental ability of the characters. Since Harrison had more handicaps mental and physically than any human ever, he must have been super human. I suspect he broke out of his handicaps in some clever way, partnered with the ballet dancer, and found a way to overcome the controllers. On the last page of the story in our text, we see his mother crying. Why would that be?

When they finally read the missing pages I handed out, they were able to review the printout of their online discussion for comparison's sake and laugh with one another and with the author. I have come to see this laughter as a very serious and crucial part of the dialogical writing process. Whether it occurs orally or in print as "hahahaha" or online as emoticons, this laughter establishes a sense of community in which students write to know literature beyond just the heady stuff of academic cognition.

Stretching the Wire

One semester when I taught two sections of Science Fiction, students were able to use electronic writing to engage in dialogue between classes rather than only within one class. One section, populated by 18-to-22-year-old students, met at the crack of dawn, garage-sale time; the other, filled with nontraditional students, met two evenings each week. Day students were full-timers, all but one living on campus; night students worked full time at jobs during the day and lived in town and in outlying areas. Although their assignments were similar and their readings identical, their perspectives varied considerably. I wondered how the online technology could broaden each group by bringing them together through writing in virtual space since doing so in physical time and space was impossible.

When we wrote about Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, the day students, a generation born after the Vietnam War, experienced difficulty understanding Billy Pilgrim's postwar mental condition. As students grew impatient with Billy's Trafalmadorans, their e-journals discussed how "nuts" he was. When the night students entered the e-journal discussions some days later, they were able to reveal insights into Billy based on their own postwar experiences, the recollections of pacifist marches, and accounts of losses left in the wake of wars:

> *Dave* (from the night class): I came back from Vietnam, but a lot of my friends never did. My own brother came back but never really returned. He looks normal to outsiders at the bank where he works, but he's the most wounded person inside you'd ever meet. And he drinks a lot. For me, it's pretty hard to see what all the killing gave us anyway and I lay awake wondering about that.
>
> *Cheryl* (from the day class): I guess maybe having visits to another planet is sort of understandable given what you say Billy's been through, Dave. Gee, I wonder if he didn't wish he could have just died in that slaughterhouse in Dresden rather than having to re-live all the horror for years.

Although we could have invited an "outsider" to speak with the class, these two groups formed a writing community using electronic technology in which they shared the stories from real life that enlivened literature for one another. It was a bit like listening to a grandmother at a garage sale explaining to her grandson as they finger saltcellars, "We used to use those the way you use salt shakers now."

Shor suggests that teachers establish a Freirean situated pedagogy where learning is seated in students' own culture (1987, 24). Through their dialogue online, students positioned themselves this way without direction from the teacher. Not only did the evening students inform the day students; just as the grandson at the garage sale may turn to inform his grandmother about the Atari game they find alongside Monopoly, so the day students took their turn. When we studied Neal Stephenson's cybernetic novel *Snow Crash,* the day students helped their nighttime classmates feel the lure of rollerblading and virtual reality interactive video games. Many other experiences with e-journals—like the one in which I found students liken Marilyn Monroe in Judy Grahn's poem "The Marilyn Monroe Poem" to Madonna, an envoy from the student culture rich in MTV and rock music—further suggest that writing with computer support encourages students to see relationships between the lives they live and the lives they read.

For students in both classes, the perimeters of their own culture expanded to include the World Wide Web, used initially to research background on literature and authors. When Bobbie chanced upon a state senator's homepage (Harkin 1996) revealing that he had been involved in investigating the inhumane treatment of prisoners of war in Vietnam, she shared the find with both classes; this sharing resulted in a flurry of e-mail letters between them and the senator's account. Through the dynamic capability of online writing with its varied audience a given, the world of student reading and the world of student living merged. Billy Pilgrim's narrator and his views of the treatment of war prisoners were no longer the mere fictional creation of Kurt Vonnegut. The issues became real, political, and contemporary for students.

In searching for "doublespeak" on the Web when we studied *1984*, students came across a Web page tirade about politically correct language and "these

feminist war mongers" ("Political Correctness, the Doublespeak of Today" 1996). The students' interpretation of the novel conflicted strongly with the author of those Web pages, a man who called himself "Bob." Cynthia Selfe and Richard Selfe (1994) suggest that writing and learning are political acts where we may analyze motives for the use of language (483). Just so, writing in the electronic environment compelled several students to write Bob in an attempt to challenge his use of Orwell's novel as justification for his somewhat vigilante purposes. None of this was assigned writing. On their own, through the electronic environment, students moved to a level of knowing the character of Winston Smith and of realizing how language control results in thought control. For the rest of the term, whenever oral or written discussion smelled of censorship, I heard students whisper "Big Brother Bob."

Over the past five years working with literature classes with a variety of writing-to-learn assignments on computers, I have been continually surprised by the golden pigs and Green River knives that emerge in students' writing both inside and outside of class. Unlike earlier literature classes where my students wrote only between the margins in print, the writing my students now produce using e-mail, networked synchronous software, and the World Wide Web results in wonderfully wild, unpredictable directions of a more dialogical nature encouraging greater attention to text alongside more independent interpretations of reader response. Best of all, students visiting electronic garage-sale writing internalize—know— literature in ways deeply affecting relationships within their own lives. I believe their success is due primarily to three phenomena intrinsic to online writing: (1) my role as teacher is far less intrusive in their engagement with literature and results in more student-centered learning; (2) students form a more active community of writers which fosters an audience of peers rather than the audience of teacher, a community that elicits spontaneous and independent interaction with the text; and (3) blending the characteristics of dialogue borrowed from oral modes of discussion with the recursive and recordable capabilities of writing results in a more dynamic interaction within the community of writers than does either mode alone. Once this community establishes a social construction for interaction, they move on to interact with the literary text itself. As Michael Spooner and Kathleen Yancey (1996) suggest, e-mail and other synchronous software offer, instead, a curious new way "of representing intellectual life" (254).

I am not advocating the abandonment of traditional, non-electronically produced writing-to-learn practices. But in concert with these department-store writings, I find students are able to write directly into the heart of knowing literature when their pens are electronic and they experience the plaster pigs alongside the Green River knives. Responding enthusiastically to the power of writing online, students in these courses grew to remind me of another story,

the story of Margaret Atwood's (1985) heroine in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Ironically in Offred's story, where even the use of paper and pen are reserved for men alone and are, therefore, the cutting edge writing instruments of her world, it is not the computer which enables her to feel the energy of words. When she is given a pen to use for the first time in three years, Offred finds "the pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost. I can feel its power, the power of words" (241). With computers—the electronic pens of the story my students wrote—the power of literature is as sensuous, as powerful, as alive.

Notes

1. In our classes, we used both Macintosh and IBM platforms. Word processing was mainly in MS Word 5.1 and WordPerfect 6.0. Students used a variety of Web search engines including Excite, Yahoo, Lycos, and Magellan. Versions of Netscape ranged from 0.9 to 2.1. Our e-mail package is Pine running on an IBM RS/6000. Macintosh computers included everything from an SE30 to a Power Mac 7100. IBMs were 486s.
2. Pseudonyms have been substituted for all student names.

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