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The Lunar Light of Student Writing
Portfolios and Literary Theory

Robert Leigh Davis

IN THE UPPER BEDROOM OF HIS HOUSE ON MICKLE STREET IN CAMDEN, NEW Jersey, Walt Whitman wrote a literary retrospective in 1888 entitled "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads." Looking back at his life as a writer, Whitman proposes this theory of literary interpretation:

> Also it must be carefully remember'd that first class literature does not shine by any luminosity of its own; nor do its poems. They grow of circumstances, and are evolutionary. The actual living light is always curiously from elsewhere—follows unaccountable sources, and is lunar and relative at the best. . . .
>
> Just as all the old imaginative works rest, after their kind, on long trains of presuppositions, often entirely unmention'd by themselves, yet supplying the most important bases of them, and without which they could have had no reason for being, so "Leaves of Grass," . . . is the result of such presupposition. I should say, indeed, it were useless to attempt reading the book without first carefully tallying that preparatory background and quality in the mind. (Whitman 1982, 660)

It's a strange metaphor: the text as a reflective surface, a lunar landscape bending back a light that comes "curiously from elsewhere." Rejecting a myth of creative autonomy, the myth of the artist laboring alone in that upper bedroom, Whitman views his work as a reflection or reconstruction of historical contexts: Emersonian self-reliance, radical democracy, literary sentimentality, and, perhaps most important of all, the lingering terror of the American Civil War. "The unnamed lost," he once remarked, "are

ever present in my mind." These are the "preparatory background[s]" of the poet's writing—the lunar light playing over the surface of his page.[1]

Rejecting the Autonomous Text

Much current teaching and research in literary studies is based on this idea: texts cannot be read in isolation. Writing, however formal, cannot be understood apart from the local, shaping environments in which it's produced. "Indeed, I believe that the most important effect of contemporary theory upon the practice of literary criticism," Stephen Greenblatt writes, "and certainly upon *my* practice, is to subvert the tendency to think of aesthetic representation as ultimately autonomous, separable from its cultural context and hence divorced from the social, ideological, and material matrix in which all art is produced and consumed" (Greenblatt 1988, 102).

This, arguably, is the most important single change in liberal studies in the past thirty years. Rejecting the notion of an autonomous text—language as a freestanding artifact, a verbal icon—philosophers, social scientists, historians, and literary critics insist on reading and writing in context.[2] Understanding the circumstances out of which writing emerges becomes as important as knowing what's on the page itself. Naming this commitment "reconstructive criticism," David Reynolds identifies it with the emergence of a new "era": "In a more general sense, I trust that we are leaving the period of hermetic close readings, based on the myth of textual autonomy, and are entering the era of reconstructive close readings, based on the reality of socioliterary dialogism" (Reynolds 1988, 564).

However it's named, contextual thinking has radically changed the profession of English, altering the way we read, teach, and write about literary texts. But the implications of this change for composition are less clear. According to Janet Emig, the assessment of writing remains entrenched in what she calls "a positivistic point of view"; that is, a point of view that denies the role of context in human meaning and behavior. Emig cites as evidence of this view writing assignments that do not emerge from a student's prior learning as well as writing assessments that presume to judge writing ability from a single sample. "To summarize," she writes, "the whole notion and enactment of a monolithic writing sample operates out of a set of positivistic assumptions" (Emig 1983, 164)—a set of assumptions deeply discredited in literary theory but just as deeply institutionalized in single-sample assessments.

Contextual Assessments

Are there alternatives? Are there assessments that support the movement in liberal studies toward contextual rather than positivistic theories of reading? If context is a crucial component for understanding language, isn't it also a crucial component for assessing it? Proponents of portfolio assessment insist that it is, and this premise provides a way of integrating literary theory and composition practice. It provides a foundational claim about language itself, and it applies to student texts the key principle in the interpretation of all texts: language is inseparable from human situations.[3] Portfolios thicken and specify those situations. They allow student writers to acknowledge the cultural and intellectual settings of their work and to make those settings an integral part of interpretation itself. Knowing as much as we can about student writers—their backgrounds, their interests, their reflections on their own writing, the range and expectations of their courses—does not compromise assessment. It does not contaminate interpretation with what we once called "extrinsic evidence." It makes interpretation possible.

Portfolios thus support changes in reading theory taking place since the New Criticism. Wimsatt and Beardsley put it this way in a famous passage from "The Intentional Fallacy":

> There is a gross body of life, of sensory and mental experience, which lies behind and in some sense causes every poem, but can never be and need not be known in the verbal and hence intellectual composition which is the poem. For all the objects of our manifold experience, for every unity, there is an action of the mind which cuts off roots, melts away context—or indeed we should never have objects or ideas or anything to talk about. (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954, 12)

Writing teachers have long resisted any action of mind which "cuts off roots, melts away context" and reconceives language as mere product. The importance of context is a central theme in composition theory, and it provides a key premise for many writing handbooks and anthologies.[4] "In this book, I have persistently asked students to think about the origins and effects of reading and writing, both their own and others'," Susan Miller writes in the introduction to her anthology, *The Written World*:

> [Students] are invited to appreciate how diverse and complex the reasons for writing can be.
>
> Consequently, *The Written World* works against a flatly textual approach that removes the selections from their own contexts and purposes. It doesn't suggest

> that students simply receive a text as an example of "good writing." Instead, it encourages them to see the cultural and individual energies that produced a text and to realize how these are at work in its words. (Miller 1989, xvii)

The flatly textual approach of much writing assessment, however, flatly contradicts this commitment. Impromptu and quantitative assessments present readers with an anonymous piece of language—a note in a bottle—detached from specific uses and situations. Such exams undercut firmly held convictions about how to read and comprehend writing. The emphasis on a de-contextualized product does not correspond with the pedagogical and interpretive models most teachers actually hold: models that encourage students, as Miller says, "to see the cultural and individual energies that produced a text and to realize how these are at work in its words" (Miller 1989, xvii). Neutralizing that energy with decontextualized assessments places writing instructors in the compromised position of welcoming the end of "hermetic close readings" (Reynolds, 564) in their teaching, only to witness the return of such readings in their assessments. They demonstrate to students that when interpretation matters most, as it does in a proficiency exam, when our readings have something serious and significant at stake, we are still New Critics. And our earnest talk about context and circumstance and "long trains of presupposition" (Whitman 1982, 660) fades into so much white noise.

"Tallying That Preparatory Background"

A portfolio approach resolves this contradiction by providing a bridge between literary theory and composition practice. It directs attention to that "gross body of life" standing apart from and illuminating the text with its own reflected light. We cannot read without that light. We can neither comprehend nor assess writing without a sense of context. "I should say, indeed, it were useless to attempt reading the book," Whitman claims, (and one could add—the essay, the journal, the lab report, the letter), "without first tallying that preparatory background. . . ." Portfolio assessment allows writing instructors to do just that: to read student writing according to the same interpretive lights they use to read and judge all writing—brilliant as well as opaque, accomplished as well as marginal, student as well as professional.

It's worth pausing for a moment to note how a commitment to the contexts of writing draws together literary theorists who would otherwise

have little in common. The culture wars of higher education threaten to engulf the entire landscape of literary studies. But there is at least one neutral ground in these culture wars, at least one Geneva Convention where nearly everyone is willing to gather for a while and lay aside their differences. That neutral ground is historical context. Robert Scholes, for example, claims that "the supposed skill of reading is actually based upon a [prior] knowledge of the codes that were operative in the composition of any given text and the historical situation in which it was composed." Ross Chambers writes that "meaning is not inherent in discourse and its structures, but contextual, a function of the pragmatic situation in which the discourse occurs." Jonathan Culler believes that "the problem of interpreting the poem is essentially that of deciding what attitude the poem takes to a prior discourse which it designates as presupposed." E. D. Hirsch argues that "every writer is aware that the subtlety and complexity of what can be conveyed in writing depends on the amount of relevant tacit knowledge that can be assumed in readers" (Graff 1987, 256). Summing up this consensus in literary theory, Graff claims,

> If there is any point of agreement among deconstructionists, structuralists, reader-response critics, pragmatists, phenomenologists, speech-act theorists, and theoretically minded humanists, it is on the principle that texts are not, after all, autonomous and self-contained, that the meaning of any text in itself depends for its comprehension on other texts and textualized frames of reference. (Graff 1987, 256)

Well, that's fine for literature, but what about composition? How do we "historicize" student writing? How do we create "textualized frames of reference" in composition classes and assessments? How, in short, do we perform reconstructive close readings when the text for that reading isn't *Leaves of Grass* but "Why Baseball Should Be Played on Grass," or "How I Learned to Mow the Grass," or—heaven help us—"When I First Smoked Grass"?

We can begin by asking student writers to do with their work what Whitman does with his: write an interpretive introduction. We can create opportunities for student writers to look back over a body of work—an anthology or portfolio—and reflect on the circumstances out of which the anthology emerged, as well as the presuppositions shaping its selection. We can invite student writers, in other words, to take their own "Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads." And we can build that backward glance into composition assessment by making such es-

says an integral part of a writing portfolio, as it is in many writing programs.

But to do this we must base assessment on more than a single sample. The 500-word essay on "Our Responsibility To Others" written in a school gymnasium on a Wednesday afternoon tells us too little about a student's real ability with language. That ability emerges when writing involves sustained intellectual dialogue of some kind. By silencing the voices surrounding the writing task—the voices in the student's reading, the voices of his teachers, the voices of his family, or his enemies, or his friends—by silencing such voices in a decontextualized assessment, we produce writing that is predictably and discouragingly thin. The student writing the responsibility essay is still listening to and incorporating other voices as he writes, but what he hears in that gymnasium is not the voice of his grandmother talking with him on a back porch, nor the voice of Socrates in the Symposium, nor that of Frederick Douglass at the Nantucket Anti-Slavery Convention. What he's likely to hear as he writes his essay is the drone of the schoolmaster: "Never begin a sentence with 'but.' Never end a sentence with a preposition. Never mistake 'which' for 'that.' Never mistake 'lay' for 'lie.' "[5] When we lift student writing out of its intellectual and classroom contexts, we flatten the possibilities of response: not only our own response to student writing but our students' responses to the voices and texts surrounding the writing task. When we lift student writing out of context, we efface what Don H. Bialostosky calls the "virtual space" between texts: the multiple, opposing voices students answer, diminish, refute, co-opt, lionize, or pointedly insult in their prose (quoted in Graff 1987, 257). By having students submit work on a variety of topics they care about—topics they have studied, talked about, read about, and understand—we begin to tally what Whitman calls the "preparatory background" of writing. We begin to recover the cultural conversations out of which student writing emerges. Only then can we judge the skill with which our students join the debate.

Negotiating the Paradigm

To do this, however, we must also change the working paradigm of writing assessment in ways that better reflect the paradigm shift in literary theory. Abandoning a discourse of fixed or universal standards, historically-minded critics like David Reynolds and Stephen Greenblatt adopt a paradigm of *negotiation* to describe the interrelation of writing and context. What's

at stake in this change is the myth of the self-contained text. Attacking that myth, Greenblatt presents a view of writing as a cultural transaction, a dynamic set of intellectual and stylistic negotiations. "[T]here is no originary moment," Greenblatt argues, "no pure act of untrammeled creation":

> In place of a blazing genesis, one begins to glimpse something that seems at first far less spectacular: a subtle, elusive set of exchanges, a network of trades and trade-offs, a jostling of competing representations, a negotiation between joint-stock companies. Gradually, these complex, ceaseless borrowings and lendings have come to seem to me more important, more poignant even, than the epiphany for which I had hoped. (Greenblattt 1988, 7)

In Greenblatt's view, the crucial question is not how well or how poorly writers transcend their contexts but how well or how poorly they reflect and transform them, how well or how poorly they negotiate specific cultural demands. The task of interpretation, then, the task of a reconstructive—rather than hermetic—close reading is to recover those demands with rigor and detail.

What goes for literature, in this case, also goes for composition. If a culture's most privileged writing cannot rise above historical contexts, what can? If "first-class literature does not shine by any luminosity of its own," what does? Student and professional writers alike respond to the intricate, shaping pressures of milieu. If anything, student writing is even more responsive to context, even more intimately dependent on setting, than professional or published writing. Thus the success or failure of student texts, precisely like the success or failure of literary texts, depends again on negotiation, that is, on what writers do with what they're given, on how writers assimilate and refashion cultural material close at hand.[6]

Recovering That "Elsewhere"

This premise opens a different and more elusive set of assessment questions: What advice about writing is a student seeking to assimilate or reject? What instructional demands is she trying to fulfill or evade? What cultural or racial or gendered resistance to academic discourse is she trying to mediate, resolve, or even comprehend? Such questions evoke typical negotiations in student writing, some of the "trades and trade-offs" by which writing is produced and understood. Emphasizing the contexts of writing leads us to

consider not how a writer measures up to fixed standards of achievement but how she negotiates the local, varied demands of her milieu: how her choice of genre fits her sense of audience, how her strategies of revision match her sense of purpose, how her ideas engage and transform her reading.

Writing portfolios open assessment to include these issues, contextual issues outlawed by formalist literary theory but embraced by virtually every other discipline studying human meaning and behavior. "Context stripping is a key feature of our standard methods of experimental design, measurement, and statistical analysis," Elliot Mishler claimed in 1979. "To test the generality of our hypotheses, we remove the subjects from their natural social settings; their normal roles and social networks are left behind, much as we leave our shoes outside on entering a shrine" (Mishler 1979, 2). It is increasingly difficult to justify this procedure, this reverence. According to Mishler, context-stripping is rapidly giving way to modes of inquiry devoted to the contextual grounding of language, methods that include "thick description" in cultural anthropology, "situated meaning" in learning theory, "indexicality" in sociology, and "reconstructive criticism" in literary studies. Portfolio assessment strengthens this emerging consensus. It builds a bridge between reading theory and assessment practice by affirming, in both cases, the intertextual basis of meaning. Portfolio assessment acknowledges the dialogic quality of student writing—indeed all writing—and it builds assessment on the reality of that dialogue rather than the myth of the text's transcendence, the myth of the verbal icon, the myth of a writer detached from his work like an aloof God, cut off from his creation, coolly paring his fingernails.

The lunar light of student writing may indeed seem alien to us. It does at times seem to come from outer space. But the light of such writing is not pure fancy, pure moonshine. It is instead a light whose energy and inspiration comes, as Whitman says, "curiously from elsewhere." Recovering that "elsewhere"—the haunting, often beautiful otherness of writers who do not share our intellectual worlds—allows us to comprehend student writing, as well as to judge and assess it, with integrity and care.

Notes

1. One of the best studies of the contexts of Whitman's writing is M. Wynn Thomas's *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry.*
2. Elliot G. Mishler provides a useful summary of contextual theories of meaning in the social sciences.

3. Patrick Scott makes this point in "Step by Step: The Development in British Schools of Assessment by Portfolio" page 84. My essay owes much to Scott's analysis of writing assessment.
4. See, for example, Edward White's discussion of how theories of reading affect responses to writing (E. White 1985, 84-99). Providing a cogent critique of what he calls the "formalistic misreading of student writing," White argues that the "author's intentions, the reader's individual associations with words, the reading situation, and all kinds of other matters outlawed by formal criticism can now be considered as part of the total meaning a reader creates from the text" (E. White 1985, 92-93).
5. See Scott's discussion of English language examinations in British schools (Scott 1991, 81).
6. Describing the interpretative practices linking teacher reading and student writing, Louise Wetherbee Phelps articulates "a new attitude toward text" emerging in composition studies (Phelps 1989, 54). "I am not prepared to characterize this new attitude with any authority," Phelps concedes, "and I am even more unsure of its correlates." But it does suggest "that the teacher must 'read' a text—however it appears bounded, temporally or spatially—as embedded in and interpenetrating many other discourses. That is, she or he must read a *situation* as fully as possible, attending to the issues of authorship, the permeability of the student's writing to its context, the embedded mixture of languages that the student is struggling to control" (Phelps 1989, 55). Phelps in fact articulates this new attitude with considerable authority and her emphasis on "negotiation"—what she calls "the negotiations of *situational* meanings" (Phelps 1989, 58)—parallels that of literary theorists like Greenblatt and Reynolds.