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NORMAN HOLLAND'S "NEW PARADIGM" AND THE TEACHING OF WRITING

It is not uncommon to find that writing is taught by one department at a university and reading by another. Whatever the advantages of this separation, it has the disadvantage of confirming to impressionable students that there is little connection between the act of writing words and the act of reading them or between the person or persons who perform these acts. Critical theory that connects reading and writing is therefore of especial value, and "reader-oriented criticism" in particular reminds us, and encourages us to remind those we teach, that there is a connection.

Most of the trail-blazers among the new wave of reader-oriented critics, however, have tended to focus their comments on fictional literature. Norman Holland, particularly in works such as *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968) and *Poems in Persons* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), has confined his explorations of the process of reading (or rather or "re-creating") to novels, poems, and plays.

His emphasis on what is usually thought of as "imaginative" or "creative" literature is due, perhaps, to the psychoanalytic bent of his approach. All stories "mean," he writes in *The Dynamics of Literary Response,* by "transforming the unconscious fantasy discoverable through psychoanalysis into the conscious meanings discoverable by conventional interpretation" (p. 28). "On the conscious level," the reader

> is actively engaged in perceiving the text and thinking his perceptions into meaning. Unconsciously, the text presents him with fantasies and defenses like those in his own mind. (p. 62)

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As Holland sees it, reading is like being hypnotized. In both cases, you suspend your disbelief, your preconditioned sense of reality (p. 85). Under the hypnotic influence of literature, you are free to entertain the unacceptable without guilt or restraint. The result is a kind of Freudian version of Aristotelian catharsis:

> The psychoanalytic theory of literature holds that the writer expresses and disguises childhood fantasies. The reader unconsciously elaborates the fantasy content of the literary work with his own versions of these fantasies. And it is the management of these fantasies, both his own and the work's, that permits their partial gratification and gives literary pleasures. (p. 52)

Expressed in this way, the psychoanalytic approach to reading would seem to apply only to writing that deliberately creates imaginary worlds to which each reader can personally relate. Seemingly, non-fiction (*i.e.,* the typical freshman composition) is not included.

But in a more recent essay, "The New Paradigm," (*New Literary History,* VII (Winter, 1976), Holland places his perspective in a context and terminology that makes direct application to expository writing more tenable. The paradigm is new because it discards the notion of subjective and objective perception. In both life and literature, he argues, "instead of two ways of perceiving reality, one 'objective' and one 'subjective,' we have only one way—transactive" (p. 339).

In making this assertion, Holland takes his cue from child psychology. The child acquires a sense of self in the early months of life by recognizing his nurturing parent as a separate Other. The recognition comes, however, not through passive observation of this Other, but through experiencing the "transactions" that take place between them (*i.e.,* mother soothing and feeding, mother withdrawing, mother responding or not responding to crying, etc.).

Similar transactions between the "Me" and the "Not-Me" occur in reading. All reading, whether of a textbook, a thesis, or a pornographic novel, constitutes a re-creating or adaptation of the existing Self in recognition of an "Other." This existing Self includes one's present knowledge (*i.e.,* what you already know about Egyptian tombs). A "transaction" takes place when you read a new book about Egyptian tombs. Although your emotions may not be involved in the reading of this factual material, you are not detached or passive. In fact, no transaction between the "literant" (anyone "actively responding to a

literary work," p. 280) and the written word is either scientifically objective or passionately subjective. All acts of reading are acts of making meaning through accommodation of Self to Other.

This accommodation is completed through a process which Holland now calls DEFT: "*d*efenses, *e*xpectations, *f*antasies and *t*ransformations" (p. 338). DEFT is simply a rephrasing of his earlier concept that literature is a world of make-believe into which the reader projects himself in order to work out in fantasy (unconscious) real conflicts he is unable to resolve consciously in the real world.

Rephrased as part and parcel of his transaction thesis, however, the idea of reading as entering the Other's fantasy and, so to speak, making it your own, relates more immediately to literature that is intentionally *non-fictional.* The freshman essay, be it exposition or argument, fact or opinion, is also an imaginary world into which readers enter and in which they actively participate through a hypnotic suspension of disbelief. The reader of an essay on "How to Build a Model Airplane," for example, is entering into a pretend situation in which he is being "spoken to" and instructed by a person (the writer) not actually present. He brings to this transaction a sense of himself in relation to model airplanes. He thinks of himself either as a naive beginner, a competent amateur, or an expert. If he knows anything about the writer, he has prefixed notions about the writer's degree of competency, too. Otherwise, as he reads the essay, he will form an opinion of the writer's expertise in his subject. Either way, by the third or fourth paragraph, a transaction is taking place between a reader (beginner, competent amateur, or expert) and a writer (beginner, competent amateur, or expert) as a result of which the literant (reader) will "DEFTLY" change. He will learn something about model airplanes, about the writer, and about himself—his identity will be altered by his re-creation through reading.

Of course, all of this theory is very interesting, and you and I, reader, are both benefiting from the transaction in which we are at this moment engaged. But 1) how do we make these concepts of the relation between writer and reader accessible to our Basic Writing students, and 2) how do we use Holland's insights to teach freshman compositions?

First, try presenting Holland's view to a class by asking them to see writing and reading as participation in a play. The *dramatis personae* are two: "Writer" and "Reader." The Writer provides the Reader with an appropriate setting in which to suspend disbelief and work out fantasies, dreams, and confusions. The writer provides approximately one-half of the lines; the reader, in responding to these, "ad-libs" the rest. If the

dialogue between the two players is successful, the writer has enabled the reader to make conscious thoughts and feelings formerly kept unconscious, and to review them in a manner both entertaining and self-instructive.

As the writer, then, the student provides a setting, stage props, implied descriptions of the writer's and reader's roles, and even, in the most carefully structured works, step-by-step blocking. Like all dramatists, the student relies on the actors (readers) to bring his meaning to life. While he tries to give these actors the right cues, he realizes that acting (reading) is partly a matter of individual interpretation. The final stage production is neither the writer's nor the actor's version of the play, but the result of an interaction between the two.

The basic principle behind this concept of all written communication as drama is, of course, not new. "Remember the audience" is a phrase as familiar to English teachers as "Remember the Alamo" is to Texans. We are tireless in attempting to raise freshman writers' consciousness to the fact that when they write, they are performing for *someone.* We have tended to put less emphasis on the fact that when their writing is read, someone performs for them.

The practical application of Holland-style reader criticism to the teaching of Basic Writing involves a combined program of writer/reader consciousness-raising, frequent writing, and frequent reader feedback. The program I am about to describe has worked well both at City College, C.U.N.Y. and at Case Western Reserve University in a freshman writing course that meets for fifty minutes, three times a week (MWF). Basically, the schedule is an in-class writing assignment on Mondays, a reading assignment on Mondays, a reading assignment in an anthology of fiction and non-fiction on Wednesdays, and in-class discussion of anonymous samples of the students' own writing on Fridays. Every other Friday an essay prepared at home (c. 500 words) is due. Each student has three regularly scheduled conferences with the instructor, more, if necessary. The framework for the course, in other words, is fairly traditional.

The difference is that all assignments are geared to discovery and exploration of the writer/reader transaction. For intial diagnosis students are asked to write an essay on "How to Write an 'F' Paper." [1]

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1. See Marilyn S. Samuels, "Choice for a First-Essay Topic," *College Composition and Communication,* XXVII (Dec., 1976), 395-6.

They can take any position and use any tone they like (*e.g.,* that five grammatical errors constitute an "F," that there is no such thing as an "F" because if the student has written anything he has not failed, etc.). The one special stipulation is that the writer and the reader of this paper must be given a specific identity: a student who has never received an "F" writing to other students who have also never received an "F," but would like to know how; a teacher writing to other teachers about what their students need to have done "wrong" to receive an "F"; a student who is an expert on failing advising other students who can get only "C's" and "D's" on how to reach their goal. The possible combinations are endless. The important thing is that the student must identify the writer/reader transaction he intends to take place *before* he writes. He must have a cast and a scenario and write the actual essay with the players and the situation as the determining structure.

For most freshmen this is a whole new way of approaching essay writing. Particularly during a first in-class essay assignment, they have neither sufficient time nor adequate familiarity with the method to do a thorough job. But I do not put a grade on these papers, and my major concern is not how "good" they are. Rather, among other things, I see this first essay as a step in awareness of the Self and the Other in written communication. Eventually, an acute sense of whom one is writing for, and of what may happen to the "literants" when they read what one has written, become subsumed by the writing process. But beginning writers must make themselves deliberately conscious of the writer/reader transaction. They must see via numerous examples that a) reading is an interaction with, not a reaction to, words and b) the reader is a personality affecting as well as being affected by what he reads. Only then will the knowledge of these concepts form an unconscious, automatic influence on what and how they write.

The second step in this "consciousness-raising" is to reproduce anonymous samples of the students' work for group analysis. The samples are distributed before the Friday meeting at which they will be discussed. Students are asked to see if they can answer the following questions about each sample:

1) What is the main thesis of this essay?

2) What role (perspective) is adopted by the writer?

3) What are the characteristics (perspectives) of the reader for whom this essay is written?

4) Do the introduction, supporting paragraphs, and conclusion promote a a consistent and appropriate transaction between the writer and reader described in 2. and 3.? Explain.

In other words, the traditional concern with singularity of purpose and organization of paragraphs is modified by concern for the transaction between the writer and the reader. The thesis must be geared to a specific individual or type by a specific individual or type. And the structure must not merely get the point across but enable a specific exchange or experience to take place between the projected players.

Asked to deal with the above-listed questions, student-readers become much more aware of switches in perspective and inconsistencies of motive on the part of student-writers. Also, they become much more conscious of themselves in the role of "readers." When they read a passage they don't understand or one that disturbs them, instead of immediately assuming there's something wrong with *them,* they re-read and try to analyze what is happening to them as they read this section and why. They re-enter the experience of the passage. The result is that either they "get it" better the second time, or else they realize that something which should have occurred between themselves and the writer didn't take place. The next step is to figure out why. What changes might the writer make to facilitate the reader's progress through his work?

Here, for example, are the first three paragraphs of a sample essay on "How to Write an 'F' Paper":

Incredibly, it is almost impossible to write an F paper. Perhaps one may manage to produce a C paper or even a D paper, but never an F paper. Sure, anyone could load up on run-ons, invent new ways to spell words like "phantasmajorical," or even invent a new word or two. Add to this a decentralized theme and a view distasteful to the professor and one would think the student had just completed the perfect F paper. Sadly, however, the student will most likely get a D for his efforts.

What the student didn't consider were all the factors against the F paper. To begin with one must consider how undesirable an F really is. To the student the F, besides being an unpleasant sound, is significant of failure. In our success-oriented society every drive is against this type of work and the student must be very strong-minded to pit himself against these drives. Psychologically, he must convince himself that it is good to be the only one to receive the accolade for success as a complete failure. Otherwise he will suffer guilt and a sense of inadequacy knowing that he did not do his best.

The English professor also considers the F undesirable. Ignorant of the

fact that the student is seriously attempting to achieve the F grade, she will more likely place a D or a C at the top of the paper. The English professor realizes that while the paper may deserve an F grade, she will never be able to motivate the student to do better if the F is given. Besides, she is afraid he will complain to her department chairman or that his parents will complain to the President of the college, so she is unwilling to give him his F.

The first thing students observed from reading this paper in its entirety was that it lacked a single unifying thesis. Approaching this deficiency through an examination of reader and writer roles, they discovered that each paragraph in the essay began a new writer/reader transaction. In each paragraph new roles were assigned to writer and reader, and a new scenario was begun accordingly. In each case, however, rather than complete the transaction, the writer set it up and left it, only to begin a new transaction in the next paragraph. Each time, just as the reader became accustomed to his part in the drama, he was required to switch roles.

The students decided that in the first paragraph the writer came across as a person who had been frustrated in his attempts to achieve an ''F,'' and was explaining the reasons why it might seem easy to get an ''F'' but really isn't. They decided that the role he had assigned to the reader was ''Sympathizer.'' We were supposed to understand his problem and, perhaps, be fellow sufferers—students who also had tried and failed to get ''F's.'' Implied was an ironic reversal of the expected scenario—a student who has tried and failed to get an ''A'' writing to students who share his frustration.

But in paragraph two, not just the scene, but the entire play changes. The writer now functions as a kind of Superego, admonishing a confused reader that unless he is willing to become a social outcast, he should not even desire an ''F'' in the first place. As one student reader put it: ''In the first paragraph the writer and I are in this thing together. In the second paragraph, he is on the other side, warning me against adopting the very same values he himself advocated in the first paragraph. I feel I've been misled and to no purpose.''

The third paragraph, instead of being scene 3 or Act III, once again begins a fresh play. This time the problem is re-introduced from the teacher's perspective. Teachers don't like to give ''F's'' a) because they don't want to discourage students; and b) because they fear for their jobs. Student readers had mixed views about the writer/reader trans-

action being set up in this paragraph. Some felt that the "real" student was using this paragraph to tell his "real" teacher (me) why she shouldn't give *him* an "F." Others felt the writer was a student telling other students one reason why, in a fictional world where the "F" is desirable, they were having difficulty getting one. Still others felt this paragraph represented an insecure student reassuring other insecure students by telling them why their teacher doesn't want them to get an "F."

The class agreed that the essay-writer needed a single thesis which he could achieve by adopting a consistent role for himself and for his readers. In the transaction that ensued he could play all kinds of variations on these roles, but the basic identity of Self (writer) and Other (readers) must remain the same throughout. As a class project, students divided into groups, and each group made a list of the main points the sample essay-writer wanted to make. They then conferred on the type of writer/reader transaction that might best present all or most of these points, and each group reported its findings to the rest of the class.

Subsequent paper topics are also designed to heighten awareness of the writer/reader transaction and encourage students to account for reader activity in the planning of their essays. One topic that has worked extremely well at Case Western Reserve is "Describing Cleveland to a New Yorker." The freshman class at CWRU is usually ⅓ native Clevelanders, ⅓ residents of rural areas in Ohio or Pennsylvania, and ⅓ out-of-towners. I present myself as a native New Yorker and ask the class to write an essay in which they describe to someone (such as me) who has recently arrived here from New York some aspect of life in Cleveland. One stipulation is that I must know from their essay who they are and to whom they are writing. If they themselves have just arrived here from Boston, then the essay must read as a transaction regarding Cleveland between a former Bostonian and a former New Yorker. Figuring out how to make each paragraph reflect this specialized point of view on the part of both writer and reader increases student sensitivity to the subtleties of written communication. It exercises their ability to control their presentation of self.

Writing assignments in writer/reader transaction are balanced by reading assignments at the Wednesday meetings. In this way, the student becomes a proficient role-player performing the roles of writer and reader of his own and fellow students' work, as well as the role of reader of published writers' essays and stories. We approach the published writers' works in the same way that we approach our own. If the

Wednesday assignment is an essay such as E.M. Forster's "My Wood," or H.L. Mencken's "The Libido for Ugly," students are asked to apply to it the same list of questions that they apply to each other's essays. In addition, once they have decided what the main theme and the roles of writer and reader are, they are required to prepare an explication of one paragraph. Their aim is to demonstrate how the selected paragraph does or does not advance the essay's writer/reader transaction.

There are several other reading exercises that effectively alert writing students to the implication of writer/reader exchange. One is asking students to imagine alternate writer/reader transactions that might take place in the treatment of the same topic. If an essay about the shortage of gasoline is presented as a dialogue between a writer who advocates greater use of public transportation and readers who share his view, the students are asked to list other possible writer/reader combinations that could be used to structure other essays on the same topic: a private car owner to users of public transportation; a city-dweller to those living in a suburb; a taxi-driver to a commuter, etc. In class, the lists are read, and students consider what changes occur in the topic and its presentation in each alternative writer/reader interaction.

Another good exercise is leaving out the ending or the last page of an essay and asking students to write their own conclusion based on how they think the writer/reader transaction of this essay should conclude. The results are interesting to talk about because they emphasize the role of reader as "re-writer" or "re-creator," and raise vital questions on the extent to which writers can or should limit individual reactions to their work.

When the reading assignment is a short story, I sometimes ask students to create an imaginary reader for the work. They are to prepare a detailed background sketch and character analysis of this person, and then interpret the story as they feel it would come across to this particular reader. The exercise works nicely with Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation." Variations in the age, place of residence, profession, religious beliefs, and physical appearance of the imagined readers in all kinds of inventive combinations have significant effects on how the story is read, on the transaction that occurs when it is read.

The ultimate effect of applying Norman Holland's "new paradigm" to the general rationale and specific lessons of a freshman writing class is not the production of amateur psychoanalysts. To be sure, depending on your own interests and the abilities of the class, there is more than

sufficient opportunity in this approach for group therapy sessions on the why and how of writing and reading. More significant for writing teachers and students is the opportunity the "new paradigm" affords to acquire a fresh attitude toward written communication. It enables the student writer to conceive of himself not as a person alone with pen and paper, but as an active participant in a relationship.

Each time students write, they are beginning something that a reader is going to finish. By the end of the course I have described, they know that this writer/reader transaction actually takes place because they have had ample opportunity to participate on both sides. The class becomes a repertory company in which each member gets his turn to experience every aspect of staging the production.

Many writing teachers know that to be a good writer you must be a good reader, and you must understand the relationship between the two. Administrative decisions to isolate these two functions academically in separate buildings or separate departments, shortages of time and money, and other discouragements have sometimes impeded our ability to act on what we know. Perhaps, the practical application of Norman Holland's "new paradigm" to the teaching of freshman composition (and to courses in media and technical writing) is an effective solution. Ideally, it will produce writers who truly view writing as an act of self-expression and who truly view the reader as an "Other" who makes necessary, reacts to, and fulfills each effort.