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Dialectical Notebooks and the Audit of Meaning

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I would claim that anybody concerned with working out ideas could, should, must be—willy-nilly—a writer, because writing provides the readiest means of carrying out what I.A. Richards calls an *audit of meaning*.¹ Writing as a way of knowing lets us represent ideas so that we can return to them and assess them.

Keeping a journal is the best habit any writer can have; indeed, most real writers probably couldn't function without their notebooks, whatever form they take or however they are kept. Notebooks can serve as cradles, which is the way Henry James characterized his jottings—scraps of conversations, speculations about one image or another, sketches of characters, plot ideas, etc.; notebooks can serve as shorthand records or as detailed accounts. Of what? Of observations—and observations of observations; recollections, remembrances, things to be remembered—memoranda; things to be returned to—*nota bene*s; things to be looked up—ascertainable facts; notions to be puzzled over. Keeping a notebook is a way of keeping track of the development of ideas, as well as of their inception and origin, of monitoring a work in progress: What work? A writer's work is getting "it" down and the essential thing to realize is that "it" is an opinion, an observation, a recording, a formulation, a representation—there are no facts, "raw data" given to us. Thinking begins with perception: *all knowledge is mediated*.

Journals, diaries, monthlies, annuals, daybooks, almanacs, calendars, chronicles: we could say that these all constitute a class by reason of the fact that they all either record events chronologically or are organized as daily, monthly, or annual reports. It gets interesting when we begin to differentiate these kinds of records and representations, noting to what degree and in what respects they are public or private; speculative or factual; closer to history than to story. It gets very interesting, indeed, when we begin examining in what sense they are all fictions, in the sense that all representation is constructed. Records of all sorts provide the means of orienting ourselves in time. Orientation: Where do we start from? What directions are we to follow? What is a point of departure? Thinking about journals can bring us to the heart of current critical theory—and if we are to learn to use them to teach writing, we will need to be somewhat theoretical. It is the nexus of theory and practice which gives us method, and without freshly apprehended and considered

method, pedagogy is enslaved to whatever implicit method comes with whatever practice we take up. Journals can be just as deadly as any other heuristic, if we don't think about what we are doing with them.

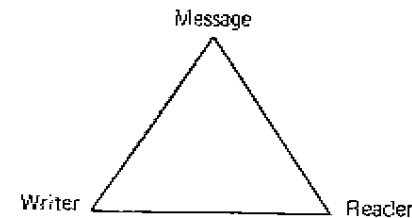
I will describe here a special kind of journal which I call a dialectical notebook. I like to remind myself (and others) that dialectic and dialogue are closely related; that thinking is a dialogue we have with ourselves; that dialectic is an audit of meaning—a continuing effort to review the meanings we are making in order to see further what they mean. The means we have of doing that are—meanings. The dialectical notebook keeps all our meanings handy. Here is how it works: the dialectical notebook is a double-entry journal with the two pages facing one another in dialogue. On one side are observations, sketches, noted impressions, passages copied out, jottings on reading or other responses; on the facing page are notes on these notes, responses to these responses—in current jargon, “meta-comment.” The first thing the dialectical notebook can teach us is toleration of those necessary circularities. Everything about language, everything in composing, involves us in them: thinking about thinking; arranging our techniques for arranging; interpreting our interpretations.

For positivists—and therefore for most rhetoricians—these circularities are dizzying. They are abjured as *self-consciousness*. “Why tell people what they are doing when they are doing it normally, naturally? Why intervene with theory when they are creating without it?” The short answer is that *knowing how* to make meaning in one instance is facilitated by *knowing that* we have done so in other circumstances. Consciousness of consciousness makes that knowledge apprehendable.

All acts of symbolization take place in a social world framed by language; hence the importance of dialogue, pedagogically. We can't get under the net to reach “reality” directly. All knowledge is mediated: all knowledge is therefore partial. Making meaning is not very much like learning to ride a bicycle; nor is it “instinctual.” Human beings are language animals: we are not controlled, limited, by a repertory of instincts. Language gives us the power of memory and envisagement, thus freeing us from the momentary, the eternal present of the beasts, and recreating us as historical creatures. The essential principle for a philosophy of rhetoric is what C.S. Peirce called Triadicity: interpreting interpretations is entailed in the way the mind works; interpretation is not added on the sign but is itself a constituent element of the sign.²

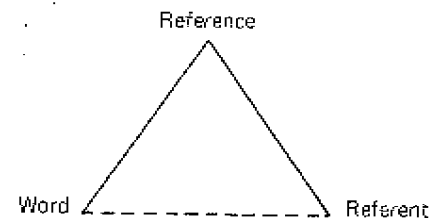
In an essay in *The Making of Meaning*, I explain this concept of mediation as follows:

Let me suggest how we might keep in mind the nature of meaning as a means, a way to remember that meaning is dynamic and dialectical, that it depends on context and perspective, the setting and the angle. The model I'm thinking of is a triangle, but of a radically different sort from the familiar “triangle of discourse,” which looks like this:



Sometimes, *speaker/reality/audience* are at the three points, with language or text occupying the field enclosed. In this model there is no way of telling the relationship of message to either its sources or to the speaker or the form in which it is expressed. As we know, “messages” are continually sent in the real world without being understood, but there is nothing in this model to explain why, or what we, as teachers of reading and writing, might do about failures of “communication.”

The triangle I'm suggesting as a model helps on that score; it looks like this:



This diagram represents the “sign,” the “meaning relationship.” What the word stands for—the referent—is known in terms of reference. The dotted line stands for the fact that there is no immediate, direct relationship between words and things (including other words); we interpret the word or symbol by means of the idea it represents to us. It takes an idea to find an idea. We know reality in terms of our ideas of reality. This curious triangle with the dotted line can help us remember that what we know, we know by means of mediating form. The triangle represents mediation, the interdependence of interpreter (what he already knows), the symbol (image or word), and the import or significance it has. Ironically, by not being quite a triangle, this triangle represents the triadicity of meaning relationships. It can help us keep in mind that we must include the beholder, the interpreter, in our account of texts; that texts require contexts and that contexts depend on perspective.³

The dialectical notebook serves many purposes, both in the general sense of helping to develop habits of mind and in the practical sense of helping with academic work. I will list these, commenting briefly, before discussing procedures and actual academic uses of the notebook.

1. Looking and looking again.

Learning to look carefully, to see what you're looking at, is perennially acclaimed as the essential skill for both artist and scientist, to say nothing of its being crucial for maturity in psychological terms. Looking is the *sine qua non* of inquiry; looking again is the method of inquiry.

The willingness to entertain further questions, to return to assumptions, to re-assess what has been given or asserted is entailed in learning to think.

Ezra Pound first recounted the story of Agassiz and the fish—how the great naturalist sent a novice scientist back to look again—and again and again—at the specimen.⁴ Paulo Freire freshly captures just what it is to teach oneself to look and look again:

One focus of my efforts (in understanding the role of thinking about thinking)... is turning myself into a tramp of the obvious.... In playing the part of this vagrant, I have been learning how important the obvious becomes as the object of our critical reflection, and by looking deeply into it, I have discovered that the obvious is not always as obvious as it appears.⁵

Exercises in looking and looking again should properly include both the most careful observation of a natural object and what Freire calls "problematizing the existential situation." Such study becomes, then, a model for close reading; reading the Book of Nature has long provided the prolegomenon to critical inquiry, and if we add reading the environment we have two very powerful models for composing.

2. Fostering fluency: gush vs. dialectic

All writers dream of fluency, of having the words come, of not having to struggle towards accurate expression and substantial representation. But fluency can, of course, be gush: a competent writer—typically, say, the National Honor Society Freshman, miffed at not being exempted from English 101—is capable of running off at the mouth precisely because he is capable of combining syntactical elements without really worrying about what weight they might bear. (Sentence combining is more likely to foster this kind of "competence" than it is to teach ways and means of subordination.) Fluency is something other than gush when the dialectic of feedback and feedforward is operating; how to get the dialectic going is the challenge.

"Free writing" can be very useful, but it is not always the best option for "getting started." The dialectical notebook can encourage list making and the development of a lexicon; it can accommodate phrases and fragmentary formulations—sketches which are not in the form of statements. What I have called "generating chaos" allows the writer to make use of looking again and thinking about what has been thought and is thus more likely to encourage a dialectical sort of fluency. Without this preparation, "free writing" is as likely as not to produce quantities of stuff, without necessarily producing points of departure. Once the dialectic of *feedback* and *feedforward* is in operation, the writer has a very powerful resource to call upon, namely the heuristic power of language itself. The tendency of words is to cluster, to form syntactic units. This tendency of words towards syntax is the *discursive* power of language; syntax brings thought along with it as it *runs along*. This is the kind of fluency the dialectical notebook can foster.

3. Tolerating ambiguity

Learning the uses of chaos prepares the writer for tolerating ambiguity. I.A. Richards once remarked that "ambiguities are the very hinges of all thought"⁶—but they can't so function if they aren't recognized. The dialectical notebook offers the means of identifying ambiguities, of addressing them, of unsnarling contradictions and resolving paradoxes. The novice writer, if she does spot an ambiguity, may well decide that the best strategy is to disguise it by stretching words illegitimately, covertly. She may eliminate it by suppressing the element that has created it. Tolerating ambiguities, looking at them again as symptoms of faulty logic or of inadequate definition or as symptoms of unsorted plenitude is probably the best way of learning the strategies of argument. The dialectical notebook allows the writer to keep things tentative, to forestall "closure," in the jargon of psycholinguistics. The most important benefit is learning to make revision not a stage but a dimension of composing.⁷ One of the hardest things about revision is how to keep from focusing too narrowly too soon. The dialectical notebook lets writers practice keeping the options open; it can toughen the resolve to change direction, to follow in new directions, if that's the way things seem to be going. The high cost of thesis statements and outlines and of the much vaunted "process" model of Prewriting, Writing, Rewriting is that they tend to cut down on the options, to hinder writers from learning to take risks by looking again at the meanings that are emerging.

4. Coming to terms with allatonceness

In composing, everything happens at once or it doesn't happen at all: we say and mean; we express and represent; we find words and words help us discover our meanings. If students can come to terms with this allatonceness, the problems and snarls which bedevil writing will more easily come under control. If teachers learn to come to terms with allatonceness, they will, in the process, revolutionize their practice. The chief virtue of the dialectical notebook is that it helps writers convert the allatonceness of composing from a formidable anxiety-producer to a resource for the making of meaning. Keeping a dialectical notebook is a way of making writing a mode of learning and a way of knowing, because its dialectical/dialogic form corresponds to the character of the inner dialogue which is thinking. In making meaning, complexity comes first: the dialectical notebook lets us begin with complexity—with looking again, with the chaos and ambiguity which are its consequence.

Because the dialectical notebook can serve as a medium for lecture notes and reading notes, as well as for notes towards the generation and development of ideas for assigned papers, it can help develop a sense of the interdependence of reading and writing, listening and speaking. All critical uses of language require the same habits of efficient apprehension, thoughtful expectation, and accurate representation. Thus, developing a skill in any one of them can help strengthen capacities in the others. The chief academic value of the dialectical notebook is that it helps a student to become a good reader, thereby learning to be a good

writer. By helping students to take notes on their notes, it helps them learn to interpret their interpretations deliberately and cogently; it fosters the habit of questioning which is, of course, at the heart of inquiry and argumentation.

What writers need to learn is how to formulate questions which have heuristic value. They won't find out how from handbooks, rhetorics, or guides which generally urge students to *be clear*; to *think* of their audience; to *go over* their writing and *take out* unnecessary words and *put in* transitional phrases. Exhortation is not instruction. (Books which in one chapter mouth the slogan "Show, don't tell" are notably weak when it comes to showing how to do anything connected with actual writing.) Learning to question is not a matter of learning to convert Study Questions to ready-made thesis statements. The important challenge is to invent one's own study questions. One teacher who has been experimenting with dialectical notebooks in a rather traditional Freshman English course featuring the study of literature reported to me recently that the first thing to happen was that her students began asking if they could make up their own topics for the weekly paper. That seems to me symptomatic of an engagement with texts that is not entirely common these days. Inventing topics, recognizing points of departure, choosing perspectives—all of that flows from learning to question. Questioning is *problem-posing* and it engages the mind more radically than *problem-solving*, as generally conceived. Anything we can do to foster a student's capacity to pose questions in substantial terms will be helping to develop the inquiry procedures which are essential to all academic writing.

The logic most appropriate to inquiry is what C.S. Peirce called *abduction*. It is a matter of moving sideways, as it were—developing analogies, drawing inferences, hypothesizing, putting claims to the test, thereby making clear the conditions under which a statement might be said to be true, of laying bare assumptions and defining presuppositions. The best way to develop skill in abductive reasoning is to practice formulating "iffy" questions. For one thing, it keeps the *what* of the statement in dynamic dialectic with the *how*. To explain that changes in language are by no means all superficial—"just semantics"—I ask students to consider this question when they are working on their meta-comment: "How does it change my meaning if I put it *this way*?" A comparison, then, of two ways of saying allows for the exercise of choice and sets up a direction.

Inquiry proceeds with drawing out implications of the way the problem has been posed, a process Peirce called *ampliative inference*. The guiding question is "Does it follow, then, that X is a cause of/a source of/an analogue of/an instance of/etc. of Y?" Practice with double entries makes the task of handling further questions a way to foster fluency in writing.

The next phase is to represent inferences which have been drawn, to come to cases. In so doing, a writer learns to differentiate necessary and probable inferences and to see how they both differ from unwarranted claims. The best way I know to control this process is by developing opposite, borderline, and model cases.⁸ It helps to organize an argument

instead of putting off that problem until all the "examples" have been gathered. The absurd conception of research which informs the Term Paper only institutionalizes an irrational procedure of Gathering Data First. It is one more example of the positivist penchant for beginning with the allegedly particular and putting off generalization; whereas in the composing process dialectically conceived, there is no question of a linear progression.⁹ The dialectical notebook develops the habit of moving continually from the general to the specific and back to the general, the movement of thought which Vygotsky saw as the essential characteristic of concept formation.

The topics of classical rhetoric—irrationally selected and only time-honored—are transmogrified, when students practice composing dialectically.¹⁰ They become not slots to be filled or hoops to be aimed for but instruments of thought. We are no longer assigning a Compare-Contrast Paper, worrying about how it's related to Narrative and Description. We no longer save Definition for English 102. The interdependence of rhetorical modes, the dialectic of the "topics," is a discovery which can set students and teachers alike on the way to a pedagogy of knowing.

I have been claiming that the dialectical notebook is useful for students as they learn the procedures of critical inquiry, which is, in my view, neither psychologically nor logically antithetical to "creative" endeavor. The more we can see in common between science and poetry, the easier it will be, then, to value the peculiar strengths of each, as forms of knowledge. Those learning to write can learn a great deal from seeing how the scientist's work is related to the poet's and how what the historian does is close to both. As thinkers and formers, interpreters and creators—as composers and writers—they are all naming the world, bringing ideas to bear on what they are naming and imagining and hypothesizing and transforming.

The motive force that drives this process of interpreting interpretation in order to make meaning is analogy—or metaphor, if we name it in rhetorical terms. Analogy and metaphor are forms of comparison in which likeness is apprehended as being *in relation to, in terms of, with regard to*: these little connectors are emblematic of Triadicity. They remind us of the semiotic principle that just as we see or apprehend likeness only if we have a scale or context, so in all our judgments, we must know by some means. Analogy provides the chief and readiest means of knowing, of making meaning. J. Robert Oppenheimer's observation that analogy is an "indispensable instrument" for both exploration and analysis in science is a useful reminder that science is not to be reduced to measurement any more than writing is to outlining. And Walker Percy's disquisition in "Metaphor as Mistake" should dispel forever the notion that metaphor is cake frosting, something you add to your writing.¹¹

Analogy is an idea we can think with; it is, in I.A. Richards' phrase, a "speculative instrument."¹² The habit of keeping a dialectical notebook makes the powerful instrument of analogy available to writers as a way of looking and looking again; of generating names and oppositions which create ambiguities which can serve as the hinges of thought. Analogies insist on being interpreted; no sooner do we create them than

they yield further questions. Practice in double-entry journals is practice in analogizing and thus in critical and creative thought.

Notes

¹I.A. Richards, *How to Read a Page* (1942; rpt., Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 240.

²In *The Making of Meaning: Metaphors, Models and Maxims for Writing Teachers* (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1981), I have set forth the philosophical principles which I find essential for the development of what Paulo Freire calls a "pedagogy of knowing." See especially: "Forming Concepts and Conceptualizing Form"; "A Curious Triangle and the Double-Entry Notebook: or, How Theory Can Help Us Teach Reading and Writing"; "The Intelligent Eye and the Thinking Hand." In the comment introducing the four sections of *Reclaiming the Imagination: Philosophical Perspectives for Writers and Teachers of Writing* (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1984), I have suggested how the arguments and speculations of the artists, scientists, and philosophers whose work I have gathered in this anthology can help us develop a philosophy of rhetoric. The sections are "Perception and the Apprehension of Form," "Language and the Making of Meaning," "Interpretation and the Making of Meaning," and "Artists at Work."

³Pp. 33-34. See also my essay, "Is Teaching Still Possible?", *College English*, 46 (1984), 743-755.

⁴*The ABC of Reading* (1934; rpt., New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 17.

⁵*The Politics of Education* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1985), p. 171.

⁶*How to Read a Page*, p. 24.

⁷I have tried to make this case in "Recognition, Representation, and Revision," *Journal of Basic Writing*, 3 (Fall-Winter, 1981), 19-32; reprinted in *Rhetoric and Composition*, ed. Richard L. Graves (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1984), pp.27-37.

⁸For explanations and demonstration, see John Wilson, *Thinking with Concepts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963). It is very important to note that the sequence in which Wilson presents the cases—model, borderline, and opposite—is precisely the reverse of the one which is logically appropriate to the composing process: it is far easier to say what a concept is *not* than it is to define it at the start; that one encourages lexical definition, which cannot do the work of concept formation.

⁹In *Forming/Thinking/Writing: The Composing Imagination* (1978; Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1982), I have tried in all the exercises to keep the dialectic going. Only if complexity is recognized and accommodated from the first will there be a chance for writing to be a mode of learning.

¹⁰As Knoblauch and Brannon have pointed out, the topics we find perennially in the table of contents of each year's "rhetorics" represent only a fraction of, say, Aristotle's original list. See Chapter Two, *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing* (Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook, 1984).

¹¹Both Walker Percy's essay and Oppenheimer's "Analogy in Science" reprinted in *Reclaiming the Imagination*.

¹²The idea of mediating ideas is recurrent in all of Richards' work, especially *Speculative Instruments* (NY: Harcourt, 1955).