Seeing What I Say: Emerson, Berthoff, and the Dialectical Notebook

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Thinking of old batteries and broken chairs, a friend of mine asked while I was working on this book, "But *can* you 'reclaim' imagination?" I explained that my project was not to pretty up or to repair or recycle the imagination but only to help bring it back alive, from captivity. . . What we need, I think, is to reclaim *Imagination* as a name for the active mind, the mind in action making meaning.
—Ann E. Berthoff

I want to do everything I can to persuade teachers, K-35, to become philosophers—to remind them that that is, indeed, what they are when they consider language and thought, theory and practice, intending and realizing, writing and rewriting; when they think about thinking or consider the meanings of meaning; when, in Coleridge's wonderful phrase, they seek *to know their knowledge.*
—Ann E. Berthoff

A method is a way of bringing together what we think we are doing and how we are doing it: *meta* + *hodos* = about the way; the way about the way.
—Ann E. Berthoff

Ideas, even as ideas, are incomplete and tentative until they are employed in application to objects in action, and are thus developed, corrected, tested.
–John Dewey

The dialectical notebook teaches the value of keeping things tentative. . . Unless students prove to themselves the usefulness of tentativeness, no amount of exhortation will persuade them to forgo "closure," in the current jargon. The willingness to generate chaos; patience in testing a formulation against the record; careful

As I began work on this piece I was startled to realize the title of my last book, *Minding American Education: Reclaiming the Tradition of Active Learning* unconsciously echoed the title of one of Ann Berthoff's, *Reclaiming the Imagination: Philosophical Perspectives for Writers and Teachers of Writing.* But the surprise abated when I reflected further on how pervasively Berthoff's work has shaped my own, not only in terms of particular ideas but, in an even more enabling way, in modeling how literary and philosophical thinking can be intimately linked to classroom practice. Too much of the literature of pedagogy, especially at the college level, has been a ragbag of "teaching tips" and survival strategies as opposed to the kind of bold conceptualizing that Berthoff has both urged and modeled throughout her career. But in dialogue with this need for constant rethinking is her conviction that each teacher need not start from scratch and in isolation, that out of the voices of the past we can construct a guiding and empowering matrix.

At the heart of Berthoff's work is her conception of "method" as an interface or mediator between theory and practice. As a true philosophical pragmatist, she believes that "ideas" in education are vague, shallow, and partial until they are honed on the whetstone of practice, "reinstated into experience," to use John Dewey's phrase. Conversely, practice by itself cannot be mindful and evolve without being philosophically conceptualized. Pedagogy and philosophy can advance each other only by remaining in immediate and constant dialogue.

comparing of proto-statements and half statements, completed statements and restatements: these are all expressions of what Keats famously called "negative capability."

—Ann E. Berthoff

The reason for the double-entry notebook will become apparent to you as you begin to see that you are conducting the continuing audit of meaning that is at the heart of learning to write critically.

—Ann E. Berthoff

For writing is not merely the setting down of what we already know, but itself a method of discovery. As we push our vague, fuzzy thoughts to precision, we find the very act of writing makes us articulate things we didn't know we knew. Before it is written out, our knowledge remains locked in our own subjectivity, shadowy and inert. As we shape it into words and sentences, it becomes more objective, something external that we ourselves can scrutinize, analyze, reshape. As W. H. Auden said, "How can I know what I think till I see what I say?"

—Martin Bickman

This kind of dialogue is embodied in Berthoff's most important "method": the "double-entry" or "dialectical" notebook. In physical terms, this is a notebook with a wide left margin—she specifically recommends law ruled paper—in which the student writes down on one side excerpts and paraphrases on the reading, snippets and summaries from class discussion, and first thoughts on these materials. Then at some later time, maybe the evening after class or the next time the notebook is picked up, the student uses the other side of the page to write further observations on what was initially written and to deepen the processes of analysis and synthesis in relating what at first may have been separate facts or notions. The student soon sees that any terminus to the process is arbitrary, only "a momentary stay against confusion," to use Robert Frost's phrase.

I began to use this method extensively in my own teaching not out of theoretical conviction but because of my own writing experiences. After my first book I found myself up against a writing block. For an entire year I wrote only book reviews while I

To understand a text is to come to understand oneself in a kind of dialogue. This contention is confirmed by the fact that the concrete dealing with a text yields understanding only when what is said in the text begins to find expression in the interpreters' own language. Interpretation belongs to the essential unity of understanding. One must take up into himself what is said to him in such a fashion that it speaks and finds an answer in the words of his own language.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer

This Book is my Savings Bank. I grow richer because I have somewhere to deposit my earnings; and fractions are worth more to me because corresponding fractions are waiting here that shall be made integers by their addition.

–Ralph Waldo Emerson

Thoughts accidentally thrown together become a frame in which more may be developed and exhibited. Having by chance recorded a few disconnected thoughts and then brought them into juxtaposition, they suggest a whole new field in which it was possible to labor and to think.

—Henry David Thoreau

worried that my string of original ideas had run out. Then I read one of Berthoff's articles on the dialectical notebook and began keeping my own as I taught a seminar on Emerson. I found as I taught the course, as I jotted down my notes for class discussion and later recollections of the discussions themselves along with my notes on the reading, my ideas seemed also to cluster and shape themselves. I used the wide margins of the notebook to comment on my own ideas as if they were those of another person, which indeed they were, a previous self who had not yet had the benefit of the next day's reading or class discussion. I began to realize experientially what before I had only theoretically accepted, that writing fixes our ideas so we can come back to them, reflect on their implications, and revise, qualify, or even liberate ourselves from. This returning, rereading, reflecting, and reconceptualizing was the missing step in my previous and not very fruitful attempts to use journaling both in my own writing and with my students.

Keeping a journal on the Emerson class turned out to be just what I needed to break up

The turns do not so much deconstruct or self-consume the text as allow it to stand while permitting further writing and reading in new and often opposed directions. They prevent the hardening of the imaginative play of mind into creed, doctrine, fixed belief, allowing the text to create a structure, but one with enough spaces for breath and for escape. . . A central paradox is that we cannot simply render or present an Emerson of process as a substitution for an Emerson of wisdom and statement. We must show him—or catch him—engaged in his dynamic constructions of meaning through our own active and dynamic constructions, in our making of it happen.

—Martin Bickman

The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind stop with some past utterance of genius. . . They pin me down. They look backward and not forward.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

These books should be used with caution. It is dangerous to sculpture these evanescing images of thought. True in transition, they become false if fixed.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

my writer's block because of the fortuitous convergence of method and content. I began to appreciate more deeply the ways in which Emerson's extensive daily journaling served him as a kind of dialectical notebook, a vast quarry out of which he shaped his lectures and essays. He not only recorded his daily thoughts, but also constantly returned to them to reread, index, and cross-reference them, and passed on this method in his mentoring of Thoreau. Tracking Emerson's composition by journaling through my own parallel process enabled me to see the ways in which his essays did and deliberately did not fit together, how he created forms that allowed thought to happen without fixing it in rigid formulations. The result was the article that ended my writerly drought, " 'The Turn of His Sentences.' "

I tell this story to my classes by way of testimonial and encouragement, and find that it carries more weight than a more theoretical pitch about writing as a tool of cognition. Indeed, I have found it best to say nothing at all about the method until the students have tried it themselves for

One must be an inventor to read well. . . There is then creative reading as well as creative writing.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

The classics, the sayings the elucidations, are dead as shells, as fossils of plants. . . To live cannot be learned from the writing of others. It is the life of writing that comes from inside.

—William Carlos Williams

Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this. Yet hence arises a grave mischief. The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation—the act of thought—is transferred to the record.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Horace Mann projected a network of schools that would transmit existing knowledge efficiently and uniformly to passive recipients, while Emerson's speech is the keynote for a tradition of active learning. In short this tradition views

a couple of weeks, and had their own experiences and frustrations with it. I do, though, try to create structures within the class itself that enhance the activities of rereading and reflection. For example, I often begin each class by having students share their notebooks in pairs or small groups, write comments in each other's margins, then discuss the entire process with each other. This method moves the dialogical mode outside their own subjectivities into an interpersonal dimension. Further, I do not give them my own topics for short papers, but ask that these arise organically from their own journaling. To facilitate the process, I again use groups to brainstorm and workshop through reading each other's notebooks. Instead of a traditional final exam, I ask them to read through all their own writings and create a synthesis or narrative account of their own discoveries throughout the semester.

My students at first wonder why so much writing is at the center of a literature course. One of my responses to this concern is to ask them to monitor their own learning processes and ask them if

knowledge as provisionally constructed by the mind in perpetual interaction with the world. . . It is a practice and philosophy that we would now term more constructivist, more metacognitive, engaging students more as culture-creating agents.

—Martin Bickman

There is one sure way of giving freshness and importance to the most *common-place* maxims—that of *reflecting* on them in direct reference to our own state and conduct, to our own past and future being. To restore a common-place truth to its first *uncommon* lustre, you need only *translate* it into action. But to do this, you must have *reflected* on its truth.

—S. T. Coleridge

"There is no way of arriving at any Sciental end but by finding it at every step." That precept of Coleridge guides I. A. Richards as he continually sets about ways of finding. We discover that our theory means only when we put it to the test and for I. A. Richards that meant teaching: the pedagogical imperative is at the heart of his philosophy of rhetoric, as it is central to Coleridge's theory of imagination.

—Ann E. Berthoff

It was Coleridge's concern for himself and for others that they should have knowledge of the truth, but his even greater concern that they should have the experience of knowing. So it was that a large part of Coleridge's educational work consisted in distinguishing, by one means or another, between thinking that was dynamic, imaginative, and fertile, and the relatively passive thing that often went by its name.

—A. D. Snyder

[Coleridge] searched for a vital knowledge which would connect thought to the facts and pressures of actual existence. . . . For such minds truth is both provisional and progressive, drawing direction and energy from conflict and contradiction.

—Gerald McNeice

Coleridge envisioned a "Dynamic Philosophy," in which seeming opposites such as concrete and abstract, particular and universal, unity and plurality, are poles or end points of a single continuum

their writing is helping their engagement with the reading. But I also try to take advantage of what I see as a teachable moment by introducing them to a related Emersonian notion: while books and the words of others may be liberating, they can also be constraining and limiting. No one before Emerson had so clearly articulated this process by which once the act of writing is completed, its effects can be undone by dwelling in the results. He noted how schools, by their very nature as institutions of knowledge can block the ongoing process of knowing, how they turn thinking into having once thought, the act of writing into texts that have become fetishes rather than incitements.

Emerson, then, like Berthoff, envisions reading and writing as processes synergistically related to each other, and sees the imagination as a way to cognitively grasp the world. Many of the similarities between them can be traced to the fact that behind both stands Samuel Taylor Coleridge. For neither was Coleridge an antiquarian figure to be merely studied and parsed but a model whose ideas need to be put into living practice. Emerson took his Coleridge primarily through the editions of James Marsh, who, as President of the University of Vermont, was one of our primary educational innovators. The publication of Marsh's edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* in 1829 was one of the percipients of the movement that came to be known as American Transcendentalism. Berthoff's Coleridge was shaped by her close study of I. A. Richards, whom she helped present to American audiences through her edition *Richards on Rhetoric*. Both Emerson and Berthoff are among the few thinkers who appreciate the relevance of Coleridge to American thought and who themselves served as primary conduits of this thought into the stream of American pragmatism.

Even more helpful for me, though, than the specific lines of historical influence Berthoff has drawn is the very energy, rigor, and erudition with which she has constructed, in book after book, a philosophical and literary lineage for a radical and forward-looking pedagogy. She has demonstrated that notions like tradition, canonicity (as long as it is

along which his own work moves
in dialectical undulations.
—Martin Bickman

I am a poor poet in England, but
I am a great philosopher in
America.
—S. T. Coleridge

constructed and not simply received), and history are not the sole possession of the cultural conservatives. Further, she has shown that classroom teaching is not a second-order intellectual activity but our version of the scientist's laboratory, the place where the word becomes flesh, where ideas reclaim a human immediacy and living presence.

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