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A DIALECTICAL MODEL FOR COLLEGE COMPOSITION

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In an essay once much anthologized, "A Dissertation upon Roast Pig," Charles Lamb applauds the savory satisfactions of his favorite food. He begins by inventing a fable about how roast pig came to be an esteemed entree in old China; he identifies the eating of pig with genteel gratification; he lavishly describes the succulence of the pig as it roasts—its crisping skin, its juicy fat, its tender meat. He compares the eating of it to the enjoyment of other dainties, declares it as tasty as pineapple, yet heartier. These accolades extend throughout the essay, with disarming good humor and gusto extolling the indulgence of an appetite. Gradually, however, as the essay progresses, other ideas slip in which widen the essay's conceptual scope: the pig is personified; it seems generously to give itself for human consumption; it takes on Christ-like qualities. The pig is thought to suffer. A digression about an injustice to a small boy extends the idea of suffering to the human plane. The word "torture" appears. There is a brief but palpable passage recalling the medieval Inquisition. Each of these ideas emerges innocuously, as it were, without arresting the comic career of gustatory joy; yet cumulatively these wayward references constitute an antithetical position, asserting that the satisfaction of one creature's desire may cause another creature pain. By the end of the essay, the question of roast pig has broadened to embrace along with the enjoyment of appetite on one side the dangers of insensitivity on the other; and the reader's laughter grows pensive.

This old chestnut exemplifies a formal strategy quite distinct from the thesis-support structure of conventional college composition, and a strategy ripe with potential for stimulating fresh thought. More than a decade ago Keith Fort called for college English to liberate itself from the "critical essay" structure. Since then several articles have extended the discussion. My own "Exploratory Essay" proposes the teaching of familiar essays alongside the expository form. Coe describes several ways to reintegrate form into process. Anderson analyzes a Burkean alternative to the conventional thesis-support structure. Lamb's essay illustrates another alternative, a dialectical form in which a thesis gives rise to an antithesis and the two antitheses struggle together, creating the need for a synthesis. During the past two years I have taught this form in my composition classes. Its chief virtue is that it fosters a respect and tolerance for ambiguity. Too many essays that I used to receive from students adopted a clear position at the outset and "supported" that position, sometimes shrilly, as if any contrary opinion were unthinkable. It seems counter to a liberal education to encourage students to entrench themselves in a complacent bias. A dialectical form requires the writer to examine opposing viewpoints.

The dialectical model stimulates thinking as all forms do, by guiding thought into specific coherent patterns. Almost invariably when we try a form—whether a comparison/contrast essay or a sonnet—we find that some of our ideas fit readily and some new ideas must be generated to complete the pattern. Thus the form spurs us to create something we hadn't foreseen. Yet we remain free of the form in the sense that we deliberate over how well we like what we produce and how well our initial inspiration has been served. We may discard a cumbersome form; but we should appreciate the rewards of cleaving to a form as well.

> Form, in its emptiness, is heuristic, for it guides a structural search. Faced with the emptiness of a form, a human being seeks matter to fill it. Form becomes, therefore, a motive for generating information. Like any heuristic, it motivates a search for information of a certain type: when the searchers can anticipate what shape of stuff they seek, generation is less free, but much more efficient; by constraining research, form directs attention. (Coe, 18)

The dialectical form not only directs the writer to consider a view excluded by the initial view; it also suggests that opposing views need not "fight to the death," but may join in a synthesis which preserves essential features of both sides.

When they choose topics for their essays, I ask my students to address issues from their own experience and reflections so that they can invest both antitheses with genuine concern. The antithesis is less valuable, less potent, if the writer retains an "us-them" attitude than if each alternative embodies a personal motive. If the initial bias does not permit the writer to treat an alternative view sympathetically, then it is best to choose another topic. But in most cases we are willing, even when we favor one side strongly, to examine the opposing side and allow that, in another context, perhaps, we might adopt its values. Such an admission opens the possibility of true antithesis. One writer (not in my class – a Texas Republican on a news program) expressed the strongest disapproval of Richard Nixon's lying to the American people; then he tempered his anger by admitting that he, too, lied sometimes. Though his own lies were not so fraught with consequence as the President's, his experience of them – being under pressure and looking for an "out" – enabled him to understand the behavior with a degree of personal insight and fellow feeling. The dialectical essay need not be confessional, but the opposing sides must not be treated as routine arguments; they must be quickened with the writer's belief.

It is important to distinguish between an antithesis and a simple contradiction. As Walter Ong cautions (31-32), a contradiction may simply deny a thesis without making a counterstatement. A genuine antithesis, however, makes an independent assertion expressed in its own terms and having its own rationale. One of my students, for example, began a rough draft by describing how important it was to her to diet and maintain a trim figure. As an opposed value she presented the spectre of unrestrained eating making her overweight and ugly. But these two ideas are not true antitheses because they subscribe to the single idea of slenderness. An appropriate opposite to a

Twiggy or a Fred Astaire as an ideal of beauty would be an equally beautiful but ample form – a Mae West or a Luciano Pavarotti. Such an opposition creates two distinct and tenable ideals of physical beauty. A dialectical inquiry requires this independence of viewpoints at the beginning, because only distinct opposites can yield a synthesis. From the position, "thin is beautiful, fat is ugly," can come the confirmation of the single inherent value. But looking alternatively, or simultaneously, at the disparate beauties of the fat and the thin can lead to the insight that people are beautiful or ugly without respect to their physical proportions, and that beauty depends not on the size of the body, but on the spirit that shines from it. A simple contradiction leads nowhere; but a true antithesis, a genuine clash of values, creates the intellectual discomfort that yearns for synthesis.

Knowing what a true antithesis is teaches a writer to look for it and to recognize it when it occurs. For antitheses do occur naturally. One of my students wrote that she found the pictures of lost children on milk cartons offensive because they suggested that children commonly got lost. She resisted this implication because she had two small daughters. The source of her resistance, however, protectiveness of her children, also gave rise to an antithesis: when she considered the possibility of one of her own children being lost, the pictures on milk cartons became not dire suggestions, but beacons of hope. As we write about any topic, we come across contradictions, alternatives, unlooked-for implications – threads which lead away from our original intention. The writer learns to cultivate these odd notions that beckon from the corner of the mind. Donald Murray talks about "pounceability," the ability to make use of a draft's surprises. The writer must be prepared to recognize and develop an antithesis when it occurs.

To witness the spontaneous emergence of the antithesis in a working draft is a stroke of luck, because it may solve the delicate problem of how to incorporate the antithesis in the final draft. The antithesis must appear in such a way as not to refute the initial thesis. Even though the antithesis contradicts the thesis, it must arise in the essay in a context of tolerance, of hospitality toward opposing views, so the credit of both theses can be maintained.

In the following passage from "Future-Grabbing," an antithesis occurs in a natural yet unanticipated sequence, emerging spontaneously from the development of the thesis. The writer has characterized himself as a mild-mannered person: In conversation he does not assert himself, but yields the spotlight to others. In driving, too, he proceeds at a moderate pace, preferring a decorous, genteel life. In this passage, however, his calm unexpectedly transforms nearly into frenzy:

> Other cars passed me routinely, of course, and I became accustomed, accustomed myself, to seeing the long open stretch before me disappear as a dapper sports car glided in from one side or a pickup scampered in from the other. I was irritated by this pattern of motion. As with the little pauses in conversation which I timidly began to think of as entries for me, in driving I also laid tacit claim to the ten or twenty yards of open road ahead. I projected my jaunty progress into that space, projected myself ahead as if I already were there; planned on it; anticipated my next move from that advanced position, as if my spirit had left my body and preceded it as a vanguard. When a racing saloon came up alongside my van, therefore, I felt edgy, for in bare seconds it would careen ahead, slanting into the space I had already symbolically occupied. It unnerved me. It offended me. And with the faithful but puny four cylinders beating their hearts out beneath me, there was nothing I could do to deny the intruder and assert my claim. For I would deny the intruder, had I the power. I would run him off the road, turn him into a ditch, let his car tumble over and over down a canyon, bouncing and bouncing and bursting into flames, like on TV. "Ha! Ha!" my psyche would shout . . . .

Here bold aggression emerges stream-of-consciousness style, in the form of a Mittyesque fantasy, from an account of the writer's passivity. The new attitude implies an antithesis – "live aggressively" vs. "live decorously." The emergence of an antithesis apparently in spite of the writer's ignorance of it, or of his attempt to withhold it, argues for its validity. The reader is put in a superior position, seeing through the writer's "mask" or conscious identity. The two theses correspond to the apparent and the suppressed personas of the writer. The scene of the essay is the writer's mind, and because we know that the mind may harbor dozens of conflicting notions, we readily accept the validity of the essay's conflicting theses.

If the antithesis does not find an entrance through such a natural slip of the pen, two other ways of introducing it are through a more deliberate irony or in an imagined dialogue. Irony is the choice of Garrison Keillor in his essay, "Attitude," in which he contrasts playing softball seriously to playing for fun. In a disgruntled tone, he describes carefree players who laugh at themselves when they strike out, or who shrug merrily when a slow roller goes through their legs. He adopts for himself a pushy, serious attitude. At first the reader sympathizes with the lighthearted players, because of the way Keillor ironically undercuts his own position. But as his language in favor of playing hard grows more eloquent, the reader wonders whether this crotchety old codger might not be right, and the essay achieves a precarious balance.

Another technique for introducing an opposing idea into an essay is the imagined dialogue. Newspaper columnists like Mike Royko and Russell Baker regularly use the device of the "man in the street" to propose an opinion which they want to consider. The writer fictionally meets a person on a bus or talks at lunch with a friend who suggests an oblique line of thought. Similarly, a dialogue can occur within the writer's mind. One can speak to an alter ego, as Woody Allen does in "Play It Again, Sam," or alternate between one's adult viewpoint and one's childhood awareness, as Annie Dillard does in "God in the Doorway," or Alice Walker in "Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self."

When the antithesis has been thoroughly established, the writer—and the reader—are disposed to seek a synthesis. They are in a position to seek a synthesis because they are in possession of two independent conflicting values. They are disposed to seek a synthesis, rather than a refutation, because the essay's treatment of the conflicting values has made apparent the virtues of both sides. The author must develop each side of the antithesis enough to strike an uneasy balance in the mind of the reader. Each side of the question must be treated sympathetically and fully enough to make the reader consider it seriously, to make it a "live option." Sometimes such a balance is achieved by emphasizing one side more than the other, to offset an audience's initial bias. But a synthesis becomes available only after a genuine conflict of values has occurred.

As with the antithesis, the key to finding a synthesis is knowing what a synthesis is and believing that one might exist. Because a synthesis derives from a balance of conflicting theses, finding a synthesis depends on being willing to sustain the ambiguity of the conflict long enough. As F. Scott Fitzgerald coun-

sels, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." The writer must refuse to capitulate to a "hard choice." Like the knight in "The Wife of Bath's Tale," who refuses to choose between an ugly wife and an unfaithful one, the writer must continue to contemplate a pair of alternatives until a way of getting the best of both turns up. More than a poetic device, ambiguity, or the toleration of conflicting visions, sometimes constitutes all the wisdom we are capable of at a given moment, a wisdom more satisfying and truer than a reductive simplicity would express.

Respect for the wisdom of ambiguity is not an automatic response. Often we do associate wisdom with simplicity. Mathematicians reduce equations to their simplest terms, and astrophysicists prefer the most elegant theories – the ones which explain a phenomenon in fewest steps. Films and stories present us with detective heroes who see through confusing complexities and deliver, with a flourish, the neat solution to the mystery, the single perspective which eliminates all ambiguity. Complexity is confusing and annoying, and "plain truth" is satisfying. But experience teaches that truth is rarely simple, and that neat solutions are as notable for what they ignore as for what they explain.

A seasoned thinker feels more comfortable with a complex but balanced and sensitive understanding than with a pat bromide. "Rambo" has been widely vilified as a stereotype which ignores the human realities of the people it represents. Marilyn Monroe was also a simple and vastly popular public symbol; unhappily, in this case too, the reality of the woman herself was more complex. These examples teach us to be wary of oversimplification and to realize that a neat explanation may obscure a more involved and sensitive perception. After some experience with such mistakes, we appreciate an honest ambiguity. A healthy respect for ambiguity disposes the writer to persevere with a perplexing situation until a satisfactory synthesis emerges, and not be tempted to retreat to a simplicity which is merely convenient.

Because a synthesis depends on the antithesis, the writer begins to achieve the synthesis in the process of developing the antithesis. For as the writer describes first one side and then the other, the very words she chooses will involve schemas which may interlace into an overarching pattern. Here again, the writer watches for the fortuitous surprise.

Like the search for the antithesis, the search for a synthesis is aided by knowing the forms in which a synthesis may occur. The classic synthesis is a third conception, differing from and transcending the two contending views. The ideal of spiritual beauty supplanting the beauty of a fat or a thin form is such a synthesis. A synthesis is more easily understood, however, as a modification of one of the original viewpoints under the influence of the other. For example, in "The Thrill of Owning," Anthony Brandt opposes the pleasures of material possession to the morality of thrift. He describes his zest for luxury at one period in his life, and his equally earnest frugality at another. Then he clearly opts for owning material goods, but now he bolsters this opinion with a moral argument, tempering his initially hedonistic one. Outwardly in this argument Brandt returns to one of his original views; but his modification of it transforms it into a new concept of ownership drawing on both the earlier understandings.

Some essays which develop conflicting alternatives do not achieve syntheses, but conclude in paradox. The essay looks earnestly and sensitively at the available viewpoints, and discovers that the issue is unresolvable – that the ambiguity of the situation is natural and fundamental; that the dilemma is a part of life, not merely an illusion. Such essays are Lamb's "Roast Pig," Lewis Thomas' "The Lie Detector" and Annie Dillard's "God in the Doorway." Dillard's essay, for example, looks into a human soul and finds love and fear contending, causing joy and grief. This conflict at first seems unnecessary, but Dillard's ardent attempt to resolve it discovers that the condition of this particular soul is the condition of humanity at large –

> So once in Israel love came to us incarnate, stood in the doorway between two worlds, and we were all afraid.

In a way, this ending in paradox involves the reader in the work, awakening a recognition of the puzzle and a desire for resolution. An essay which ends ambiguously does not simply fail to solve the problem it raises; it asserts that a complex understanding of the issue is more true to life than a reductive simplicity.

I hope that I have made clear that the dialectical model is both a set form and a method of inquiry. The virtue of writing this or any form is not successfully to complete a pattern. Many of the essays I have received in my classes have failed in one way or another to adhere to the format I've described; but in an experiment in which six colleagues read two sets of essays by the same class, the readers agreed that whatever the essays' formal failings, they were substantial and thoughtful. The dialectical form need not limit writers in any way but to move them on to new discovery. It is a form which is used in familiar essays of earlier epochs and our own. Its demand for an antithesis urges writers to look past the limits of prejudice and custom. And its quest for a synthesis teaches that even the starkest of conceptual conflicts may find satisfying resolutions.

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