

to students in every way possible that invention is recursive – that they will need to return to this generative phase of writing many times in the course of a single assignment. They need to know that invention is far more than “pre-writing.” It is also writing and rewriting.

Above all, students need to realize that invention, like writing itself, is hard work. Invention is not a few tricks that writers use to gain access to a store of material that exists in their minds, simply waiting to be released. It is difficult, time-consuming mental exploration – more like mining than magic. Rather than a kindly muse that bestows the gift of content on the gratefully inspired writer, invention is an angel with whom the writer, like Jacob, must wrestle.

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IMITATIO REVIVED: A CURRICULUM BASED UPON MIMESIS

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Until quite recently, the classical principle of composition – *imitatio* – was essentially ignored in almost all the pedagogies for the teaching of writing.¹ The many reasons for the virtual disappearance of *imitatio* as a heuristic for the teaching of writing originate in either cultural Romanticism or Post-Romanticism. Living on the leeward side of the mountain of Romanticism, we find it hard to appreciate the creative winds blowing prior to the tempestuous early nineteenth century. In order to understand fully why pre-Romantic authors willingly acquiesced in a creative anonymity, we must realize that they assumed that only God

can truly create – that only He can make the Word (that was the World), the word that authors rearrange, reorder, or reconstruct but that they never fabricate *ex nihilo*.² With the Romantic cultural revolution came the extraordinary idea that a poet, or dramatist, or novelist could invent great art from his own personality, entirely from imagined nothings. Accompanying this new view of the imaginative writer as a little god was an inspirationist theory of passive creativity – the wind through the Aeolian Harp.³ The pure Romantic artist lit his midnight lamp, mended his quill, spread his paper before him, and waited, waited for those inner stirrings whose absence or sudden rush so preoccupied Coleridge and Wordsworth that this affective ebb and flow finally became the subject of verse.

In light of this nineteenth-century notion of literary creation, it is not surprising that the classical doctrine of *imitatio* figures so little in the twentieth-century textbooks for college writing courses. Essentially Romantic in their occasionally unexamined pedagogical assumptions, they omit systematic directions for imitation apparently in the belief that not only will an essay subject be spun out of the writer’s innerds but also that an appropriate style and rhetorical structure will be mystically intuited and realized as well. Certainly the cavalier assumption, dominant until about fifteen years ago, that all a faculty need do was give bright graduate students good literature to teach, point them in the direction of their first classroom, and presume that good student writing would occur was based upon the unexamined bias that literary creativity was a Romantic phenomenon, mystical in its workings and damaged if overdiscussed or overly tampered with. While the current emphasis for the teaching of process in the writing classroom mainly reintroduces classical techniques into the creation of a composition, all too often it leaves the question of acceptable models for writing in limbo.

A brief consideration of the opinions of pre-1800 writers on writing reveals how prominently the doctrine of imitation figured in their thinking. For example, in the sixteenth-century milestone of Courtesy, *The Book of the Courtier*, Baldassare Castiglione counsels, “He therefore that will bee a good scholler, beside the practising of good thinges, must evermore set all his diligence to be like his maister, and (if it were possible) chaung himselfe into him.”⁴ In terms of writing, this means that the courtier must so get under the master’s stylistic skin that the latter’s very syntax, prose rhythms, and diction become second nature to the novice. For generations, different societies believed that such literary transference could take place through systematic instruction. For example, Edward P. J. Corbett, in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, identifies three traditional imitation exercises. (1) “Roman schoolboys . . . were regularly set the task of translating Greek passages into Latin and vice versa. In some of the Renaissance schools in England, schoolboys worked back and forth between Greek and Latin and English.”⁵ Corbett might have mentioned Roger Ascham’s famous method of double translation, set forth in *The Schoolmaster* (1570), as an instance of the principle. After translating Cicero into English, the schoolboy waits an hour before translating the English back into Latin. By comparing the student’s Latin with the Ciceronian original and noting the differences in prose rhythms, syntax, and diction, the schoolmaster recommends *imitatio* as a heuristic for learning a foreign language.⁶ Corbett continues:

(2) Another exercise imposed on schoolboys was the practice of paraphrasing poetry into prose. . . . (3) Another common practice was to set the students the task of saying something in a variety of ways. This process usually started out with a model sentence, which had to be con-

verted into a variety of forms each retaining the basic thought of the original. Erasmus, for instance, in Chapter 33 of his widely-used little book, *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum*, showed the students 150 ways of phrasing the Latin sentence, *Tuae literae me magnopere delectarunt* ('Your letter has delighted me very much'). . . . Ultimately [the student] learns that although there is a variety of ways of saying something, there is a "best way" for his particular subject matter, occasion, or audience (pp. 448-49).

Be assured that I am not recommending imitation according to Erasmus in the American classroom of 1988. Still, imitation exercises based upon single, model sentences can be highly beneficial. In imitating a complex sentence of a prose master, the student essentially observes at least the same kind, number, and order of clauses and phrases while creating different content. Reading a sequence of model sentences aloud before imitating their form, the student, using a pen or pencil, imitates a particular style every day for a month, writing for no more than fifteen or twenty minutes per day. By following this regimen, the student writer practices handling the sentence, directs his attention to grammatical constructions, enlarges his vocabulary and becomes a better speller, and fills his mind with mature standards of prose. As testimony to the benefits of exercises based on sentence imitation, Corbett quotes Winston Churchill on his schoolmaster's method: "Mr. Somervell had a system of his own. He took a fairly long sentence and broke it up into its components by means of black, red, blue, and green inks. Subject, verb, object: Relative Clauses, Conditional Clauses, Conjunctive and Disjunctive Clauses. Each had its colour and its bracket . . . Thus I got into my bones the essential structure of the ordinary British sentence" (p. 451). Requiring students to use different-colored ink when they imitate corresponding parts of a model sentence, composed in the same variegated colors, encourages writers to match correctly parts of their sentence with elements in the prototype. In this technicolor way, the teaching and learning of grammar are greatly facilitated.

The remainder of this paper describes a plan by which traditional exercises in *imitatio* can be adapted and enlarged to foster better writing of the whole essay. This plan depends upon the development of a special guidebook. A freshman writing program based in whole or in part upon the principle of imitation might include a guidebook, created by the departmental freshman English committee and incorporating various large models for student writing. Planned in successive editions, such a guidebook might help establish a curriculum employing *imitatio* by entailing a multi-year plan for execution. In the first phase of such a systematic implementation, members of the freshman English committee might solicit, select, and edit student essays reflecting the five traditional letter grades—"A," "B," "C," "D," and "F." This process works best when all student essays reflect either a single expository aim or a single pattern of development. Although a laborious task, creating separate profiles of the general qualities of each of the five grades of student writing must be done first, chiefly because committee members will later need objective rationales when discussing whether a specific paper ought to be listed, for example, as a "B" or "C" essay.

After reconvening, committee members hammer out a compromise profile that will represent the department's idea of each of the five levels of essay quality. Here, for instance, is the agreed-upon profile of the "C" essay appearing in the *Baylor University Guide for Freshman Composition*:

The 'C' essay contains a clearly stated or strongly implied central idea which controls the development of the writer's subject matter. The major points of development are clear, perhaps in formal topic sentences, but the paper may need more concrete details to support the general ideas. The writer frequently fails to satisfy the reader's desire for proof or illustration. Although its logic is often sound, the 'C' essay may exhibit only conventional or stereotypic thinking often expressed in clichés. The introduction and conclusion are proportionate to the length of the paper, but the conclusion may simply repeat ideas from the introduction almost verbatim. For the most part, paragraphs are well-organized, with adequate though not subtle transition. Diction is fairly appropriate but may be hackneyed sometimes; moreover, the writer may mix levels of usage. Sentence structure frequently lacks variety and may contain shifts in tense, voice, or person. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors are not distracting. Overall, the paper seems mechanical, reflecting little awareness of audience. Even though an essay may be generally strong throughout, a major problem in content, organization, or mechanics warrants the 'C' grade.

Obviously such a profile has a limited usefulness; faculty and especially freshmen ought to be informed explicitly that the profile does not describe many "C" papers. While the different blends of compositional elements making up the "C" essay are virtually infinite, a profile such as the one just presented can make assigned grades seem less arbitrary to students. Moreover, armed with composite profiles, faculty members of the freshman English committee possess a relatively clear, detailed frame of reference for selecting and possibly editing two student essays at each grade level. As previously mentioned, including only those essays written in a single, specified mode makes the comparison of essays at different grade levels more plausible logically. I recommend the mode of definition, simply because it usually requires most of the other paradigms of composition, a fact which often results in relatively sophisticated student essays.

In this initial phase of a composition program partly based on *imitatio*, students might be urged to imitate the virtues of the "A" essays in the guidebook. In particular, teachers might direct students' attention to stylistic features that have proved particularly troublesome to master for developing writers. Such features often include the originality and effectiveness of the paper's opening and close, the concrete development of paragraphs through at least six or seven sentences, the frequency and appropriateness of logical transitions between paragraphs and between sentences, the relative liveliness and aptness of diction, and the suitable variety of sentence structures.

Using the four representative "A" and "B" essays in the guidebook, students can practice several exercises in imitation designed to enlarge their repertoire of skills. For example, the teacher might prepare several worksheets in which a large part of the "A" essay's text is replaced by straight lines creating blanks, with only a selected feature of the essay remaining precisely as it does in the paper. If logical transition is selected for emphasis, all phrases and words promoting the essay's logical coherence would appear. The student's task then becomes one of composing new content of hers or of the teacher's choice between the given words and phrases. Of course the new content must dovetail intellectually with pre-existing terms of logical transition. Like virtually all imitation exercises, this task proves most beneficial when completion time is less than twenty or thirty minutes and when repetition of the assignment causes the student to inter-

nalyze the stylistic traits stressed. During each imitation, the student should strive to create different content. This specific exercise can be profitably reversed; in other words, students might be given the content from one of the essays in the guidebook with all logical transitions removed and replaced by straight lines creating blanks. Then, without recourse to the guide, the student might be required to supply an appropriate term of logical transition. Again, this imitation exercise works well when repeated several or many times; in this case, the teacher would want to provide a different context on each occasion, drawn from either other student essays in the guidebook or other texts.

Other exercises during this initial phase of a curriculum based on *imitatio* might include imitating selected sentence structures as well as strategies for opening and closure in the "A" or "B" essays in the guidebook. If, for example, the opening and close constitute a single, divided anecdote functioning as a framing device, the teacher might select key words from the student essay—key words that signal "anecdote" and determine its narrative shape—and reproduce them isolated by straight lines creating blanks that replace the removed text. Student imitation thus consists of creating a new anecdote consistent with the directional words on the form. Repeated several or many times, each time with a different anecdote, this imitation exercise can help students fashion concrete, proportional beginnings and endings for essays. Additional exercises might focus on the use of quotations or statistics, either framed or unframed, as strategies for opening and closing a paper. Furthermore, the teacher might select five or six of the more sophisticated sentences in the "A" essays, reproduce them with blank lines between key conjunctions, adverbs, or prepositions defining their rhetorical structure, and then ask students to create new content between the pre-existing words, content that makes logical sense in light of the given words and phrases. If inclined, the teacher might incorporate Churchill's schoolmaster's use of a special coding via multi-colored inks for the content of similar grammatical constructs within the sentence.

Finally, imitation exercises based upon the concept of generative paragraphing prove enlightening for the student. It was Francis Christensen who first employed a system of indenting and numbering the sentences of a paragraph in order to diagram its levels of relative abstraction and specificity as well as its logical progression.⁷ In Christensen's scheme, the farther to the right the indentation and the higher the number, the more specifically the sentence clarifies or illustrates a prior abstraction or relative concrete statement. In this respect, the teacher can select several well-developed paragraphs from the guidebook's essays, diagram them according to Christensen's method, and then remove all content, leaving the student with a sheet of paper blank except for the numerals variously indented before the absent sentences. In this imitation exercise, the student invents generalizations, illustrations, and clarifying statements logically appropriate to the function of the missing sentences. Through this type of imitation, writers are stretched to develop complex paragraphs, laden with a number of relevant concrete details. Repeated several times, this exercise definitely strengthens a writer's paragraphing skills.

In the rest of this essay, I shall describe later phases of a composition program based upon imitation. This extension becomes most significant when writing assignments reflect a certain mix. Alternating writing assignments by first modes of development and then aims of writing more fully develops composition skills than does limiting a curriculum to only one or the other ration-

ale. Generally, freshman textbooks for writing identify six to eight modes such as narration, description, comparison/contrast, causal analysis, division and classification, exemplification, and so on. Most textbook discussions of writing aim adopt Kinneavy's now-classic anatomy.⁸ Usually four aims emerge, with self-expressive, informative (or referential), evaluative, and persuasive the most commonly used labels for them. A freshman writing program devoted exclusively to the modes of development has students writing from artificial assignments bearing little resemblance to writing tasks encountered later on the job. A curriculum focusing solely upon expository aims risks systematic instruction in those logical habits of thought mirrored by the traditional patterns of essay development, habits of thought that the writer most certainly will need to combine during her professional or vocational writing. Thus a blend of both pedagogical rationales in freshmen composition appears advisable.

In the second phase of a writing program partly based upon *imitatio*, the guidebook might be considerably enlarged to include representative student essays written in the accepted modes and aims of composition. Two student essays illustrating the ten to twelve modes and aims of writing would require a rather substantial guidebook of thirty to thirty-four student essays, once the original ten papers reflecting the five different grade levels are included. Needless to say, the essays illustrating modes and aims ought to be of "A" quality. The sequence in which these essays appear in the guidebook might suggest a two-semester freshman writing curriculum, perhaps from narration and self-expression to definition and evaluation.

Having identified the kind of essay he or she is writing, the student imitates certain features of the representative essay in the guidebook. For example, pure imitation exercises for a self-expressive paper might consist of the repeated transcription of a passage of richly textured prose, reflective of an emotional mood or a subjective insight. If the freshman writer practices such imitation for fifteen or twenty minutes immediately prior to a variant of freewriting such as looping, his or her style will more likely retain some of the constructions and phrasing strategies contributing to a textured style. Incidentally, perhaps this is the moment to address some readers' anxiety about possible plagiaristic effects of *imitatio*. One could scarcely label as plagiarists the effective writers nurtured by *imitatio* prior to 1800. In fact, the heuristic apparently helped produce some of our most original men and women of literature. As William Gruber has demonstrated, systematic instruction in imitation helps the student writer, over a period of time, to discover his or her literary creativity (pp. 491-92).

The number and nature of imitation exercises that can be based upon a guidebook containing thirty-four student essays are promising indeed. In pre-writing a narrative essay, for instance, the student might first imitate a general pattern of direct quotation, reported discourse, and description in a model paper. Persuasive assignments might call for *imitatio* involving the sequencing of a reasons-counterargument form found in the guidebook—or the alternation of ethical, logical, and pathetic appeals. Other imitation exercises might involve the evaluative aim. Certainly well-chosen models of student literary criticism can go a long way toward helping students to achieve the complex paragraph development and mature style found in effective literary criticism. Imitating the tight, logical development of an interpretation of an aspect of a novel or a play causes a student to realize that critical writing requires intellectual rigor.

These and many other imitation exercises can resurrect *imitatio* from his deathbed, giving him a vital place in the modern classroom.

NOTES

¹For representative explorations of *imitatio* as a literary technique, see the following articles in *College English*: William E. Gruber, "'Servile Copying' and the Teaching of English Composition," 39 (1977), 491-97; John J. Ruskiewicz, "Parody and Pedagogy: Explorations in Imitative Literature," 40 (1979), 693-701. Also see Frank J. D'Angelo, "Imitation and Style," *College Composition and Communication*, 24 (1973), 283-90.

²A representative version of this view is given by J. A. Burrow, *Medieval Writers and Their Work: Middle English Literature and its Background 1100-1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 29-42. Also see Ronald Tamplin, "Creation, Imitation, and Translation," *College English*, 37 (1976), 808-09.

³See M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 51-52.

⁴Trans. Thomas Hoby, Everyman's Library (London: Dent, 1928), p. 45.

⁵(New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 448.

⁶Ed. Lawrence V. Ryan (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 78-81.

⁷*Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*, ed. Bonniejean Christensen (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

⁸*A Theory of Discourse: The Aims of Discourse* (1971; rpt. New York: Norton, 1980), esp. pp. 48-72.

A MODEST PROPOSAL: IN DEFENSE OF DIGRESSIVE WRITING

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"In general, however, digressions are to be avoided."

Crews and Schor, p. 545

I

I want to propose tongue-in-cheek, and in contrast to the epigraphical statement above, that every writer should digress right and left, back and forth, up and down, inward and outward at every opportunity. (Of course, no reader, unless cannibalistic or insane, ever presumed that Swift seriously proposed the consumption of Irish infants as a way of overcoming poverty.) There are, however, certain assumptions characteristic of this tongue-in-cheek stance, the stance I adopt in the next section of these remarks. One such, in this instance, is that this author is not advocating a chaotic rhetoric, a total abandonment of all rational guides writers have followed from time immemorial; neither is he advocating a slavish and uncritical acceptance of the conventional processes advanced in what Richard Lanham has called "The Books."¹ Such acceptance, I believe, inhibits, restricts, perhaps precludes inventive, spontaneous, creative thought and expression. In the final section of these remarks I summarize what I consider some of the specific virtues of a digressive composing procedure.

II

The authorities of the rhetorical establishment, such as those Lanham identifies with "The Books," publish books on how to write, usually with monotonous and repetitive advice about

choosing a subject, writing a concise thesis statement, selecting relevant topics, using pertinent details, following an organizational pattern, applying logical criteria.² They are not original and creative and spontaneous the way we digressive, stream-of-consciousness writers are; they are committed to such traditional values as unity, and coherence, and emphasis in a unit of discourse.

In fact, if I may extend this exaggeration, they offer us pointed instructions, rules, admonitions, dicta, advice, and directions on how we should think (unintentionally, of course), who we are, why we can't write, how we can write, with accompanying questions on each model or paradigm, and an extended set of suggestions or writing "exercises" or rhetorical calisthenics which will redeem us, or at least allow us to move among those who can compose and write.³

They think we digressors write off the tops of our heads. They look down on us as the worst of all sinners and have, I am certain, placed above the portals of their rhetorical heaven the bald-faced statement: DON'T DIGRESS. If they mention digression in their texts, they use prejudicial and pejorative terms and scornfully introduce examples of our work. They fail to recognize that an effective digression may be worth any number of self-evident or inane theses or articles or essays. Shakespeare knew this when he introduced his first aside.⁴ In these remarks I do not intend to consider the broad and extended subject of digression but only to defend a few techniques or strategies any writer may practice and develop to enhance and polish his digressive prose.

By way of background and illustration, consider the establishment notion that ideas will fit neatly into parallel order in an outline.⁵ Ever looked closely at such an outline and wondered where the writer went? Jacob Epstein, editor of *The American Scholar*, is more our kind of writer. In a discussion of the process he followed in writing an essay entitled "What Is Vulgar?" he says flat out: "I am not opposed to outlines in logic or on principle but by temperament. I have never felt comfortable with them" ("Postscript" 439). There! He understands the digressiveness of us stream-of-consciousness writers. He understands the psychological discomforts that outlines generate.

An outline says that we know where we are going before we have written the first paragraph. Again we have Epstein to defend our way of writing: "I have discovered that there is no way I can know what will be in the second paragraph of something until I have written the first paragraph.⁶ My first paragraph may contain a phrase or end on a point I hadn't anticipated, and this phrase or point may send me off into an entirely unexpected direction in my second paragraph" ("Postscript" 439).⁷ Epstein understands the excitement and suspense and sense of discovery we digressive writers experience when we put our thoughts into words on paper. I would guess that the real issue probably comes down to whether we are Platonists or Aristotelians. Plato, I would imagine, rarely if ever used an outline; and Aristotle probably never wrote without one. We digressive writers are true-blue Platonists.

But I have digressed too long. Initially I said I would defend digressive techniques, ways of staying or straying away from the subject, thesis, topic, or idea of a unit of discourse. You will want to sustain your stream-of-consciousness creativity by practicing routinely the following techniques. Remember what George Orwell said, in "Politics and the English Language," about the five rules he had proposed for effective prose writing: "Break any of these rules sooner than say anything barbarous"