THE ART OF PROPHECY: INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS, ACADEMIC DISCOURSE, AND EXPOSITORY WRITING

The essayist’s “main gift is an eye to discover the suggestiveness of common things: to find a sermon in the most unpromising texts.”

Alexander Smith, 1914 (qtd. in Harris 935)

In the late 1500s, William Perkins published the *Art of Prophecying*, a manual attempting to improve the quality of preaching in England. Like most Puritan theologians of his day, Perkins recommended that the sermon be organized in three sections, the “text,” the “doctrine,” and the “application” (2:673). According to Perkins’ system, ministers should choose an important verse from the Bible, such as “Let there be light,” read it out loud, and then explain what it means on several levels. For example, ministers might interpret the meaning of the Creation in Genesis by breaking down the meaning of light into *visual* light and *spiritual* light. Depending on their temper, ministers might unfold eight or nine different interpretations from a single verse. After the permutations of the doctrine have been surveyed, the sermon then shifts to an application of the doctrine to the lives of the congregants.

While Perkins’ method of exegesis is hardly unique, it foregrounds an intellectual skill which is crucial, if not central, to academic discourse today. Perkins calls the act of analytic interpretation “prophecying,” not because ministers are seeing the future, but because they’re performing a vatic function of interpretation—*saying*. The purpose of these acts of interpretation, Perkins writes, is to “edify” people about the meaning and spirit of the scriptures (646). Prophecying is a multi-leveled interpretive

Granville Ganter is currently working in rhetoric, oratory, and nineteenth-century U.S. civic culture. He has published essays on *The Columbian Orator*, the Seneca diplomat Red Jacket, and the Grateful Dead.

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act of creation. It’s what many of us mean when we talk to our students about “unpacking” the meaning of a text.

For those who have taken the hermeneutic turn, (and even for those who haven’t), this story is probably a quaint theological example of a cognitive practice that scholars everywhere perform in different ways in their own disciplines. The broad currency of this critical practice, however, is my point: analytic interpretation, the creation of meaning, is what the critical liberal arts disciplines share. In this essay, I argue that while competence in interpretive analysis is a commonly acknowledged goal of a college education, it is rarely explicitly addressed in the curriculum. Because interpretive analysis makes specific cognitive and generic demands on writers, our expository writing students would benefit from both theoretical and practical training in these kinds of exegetical skills.

As I use the term in this essay, analysis refers to the technique of critically interpreting an idea or problem by breaking it into meaningful parts. I emphasize meaningful parts because the skill is not simply defined by expertise in division and classification: it’s about explaining why those parts are important in respect to different contexts and circumstances. Interpretive analysis is both a habit of thought (a cognitive trick) and a rhetorical protocol (an expressive structure in speech or writing). In either case, it’s the intellectual machinery of conceptual exegesis. At the risk of oversimplifying the activity I am trying to describe, let me suggest that interpretive analysis is typically forecast with rhetorical expressions like, “the judge’s decision avoids several thorny legal questions. First, it indicates . . .” Presumably, what follows will be an analysis of the ruling. This practice is very similar to what religious authorities around the world routinely perform in explaining the significance of sacred texts.

While we may assume that analysis is an obvious characteristic of critical writing, our less-prepared students have great difficulty recognizing it when they encounter it. Patricia Bizzell has pointed out that our two-year and public university students often enter school with a limited familiarity of written genres (165). The problem, however, is not just recognizing objective tone: our novice students don’t habitually register the difference between analytic interpretation and other types of narrative. When they look at academic discourse they see only persiflage: fancy words, convoluted syntax, and the pretentious invocation of authority. For them, academic discourse sounds like pompous language, not meaningful discrimination.
As I shall suggest later in this essay, our students are not alone. In many of the contemporary debates about academic discourse, the culture wars, and our internecine battles over college Core requirements, humanities faculty have played a losing hand by betting on the content of a liberal arts education. We’ve had difficulty justifying our curricula to ourselves and to others. Perhaps, however, as Robert Scholes suggests in the Rise and Fall of English, we would be better off defining our discipline’s value in terms of method rather than content (145). Literature and writing faculty can play an important trump: as a language-oriented discipline, English teaches the art of creating meaning in texts. No matter what our disagreements over texts or turf (literature vs. composition), the tissue of our professional discourse is interpretive analysis. It’s how we express ourselves to each other; it’s how we expect our students to express themselves to us. This methodological approach seems to have been lost in the way we describe our discipline.

Curriculum and Textbooks
Analysis is so integral to the Euroamerican liberal arts curriculum that we seldom feel the need to talk about its centrality or complexity (Fox 125). Among the academic disciplines, explicit analytic training is divided awkwardly among Philosophy, English, and Speech departments, all of which encourage students to analyze concepts as a means of creating the raw material for their arguments. Traditionally, the Philosophy department covers training in analysis by offering courses in critical thinking and logic. Because many schools have removed philosophy and speech from their core curricula, training in written critical analysis has fallen heavily on English departments, particularly on the composition courses that fulfill graduation requirements. But often, the required composition courses in two-year and large public institutions are organized around issues of coming-to-voice, practice with rhetorical modes (like summary, comparison-and-contrast, description, etc.), syntax review, and research skills. Even in schools that offer a two-semester expository writing requirement, there isn’t much time for an introduction to critical thinking. When critical thinking is discussed, it is usually spent teaching strategies of argument, shooing students away from a catalogue of logical fallacies, and trying to make them comfortable with words like enthymeme and warrant.

The core curricula of most colleges and universities thus suggest that habits of interpretive analysis will be absorbed by students from the
variety of courses that they take. Indeed, for each major, students presumably learn how to perform the type of analysis that suits their discipline or future profession. English majors are generally well-trained in habits of literary analysis after four years of college, even if they’ve hardly paid attention in class. Few of them, however, could self-consciously explain how analysis is a part of what they do.

Especially in our composition courses, we expect our students to develop their analytic skills, but these skills are rarely the subject of instructional units in our courses or textbooks. The term analysis is seldom listed in a textbook index; most don’t even discuss the skill directly at all. For example, the MacMillan Writer (Nadell, McMeniman, and Langan), a widely distributed composition book, offers a chapter identifying some basic maneuvers in expository writing—description, definition, classification, comparison and contrast, and argumentation. Many textbooks devote a chapter to each of these modes of discourse. Almost all contemporary composition books cross-index reading selections under these schemes or offer advice about how to write descriptive or argumentative essays (a comprehensive list would be needless to cite here, but such texts include Ackley, Gillespie and Singleton, Hairston and Trimmer, Knepler, and Langan). Practice in these rhetorical modes implicitly trains students to analyze. The classification of different types of families, for example, asks students to break down a concept that they initially think of as a simple whole. Similarly, many writing textbooks are devoted toward investigating specialized questions of social diversity, gender, the media, or the environment. These texts generally combine exercises in description, summary, definition, compare-and-contrast, and argument with their topics. By working through ideas like “what is nature?” students learn to break down apparently simple questions and to make fine distinctions in meaning.

While faculty can generate excellent assignments from these texts, it’s a question of instructor interest and expertise (see, for example, Min-Zhan Lu’s series of critical writing assignments based on a political analysis of a Milan Kundera story). Surveying the online syllabi of second semester, required writing courses offered at the state universities of Texas (Austin), Florida (Gainesville), Minnesota (Minneapolis), Ohio (Columbus), New York (Buffalo), and California (Irvine), and at the universities of Pittsburgh, Purdue, and Syracuse (a haphazard list, dictated largely by access to web-available syllabi), I found that in most cases, the course textbooks powerfully shape the type of writing assigned. Descriptive essays, compare-and-contrast, and various types of
researched arguments are very popular assignments, and they are often
defined by the corresponding chapters in the assigned textbook.
Noteworthy exceptions are assignments like analyses of webpages and
journals, and local-issue analyses. Some courses offer variously named
*process, process analysis,* or *causal analysis* papers, which, except for
causal analysis, emphasize descriptive skills more than interpretation.
Class activities often center on the use of secondary sources, grammar,
student presentations, and discussions of the reading homework (which is
typically where extensive analytic training occurs). But granting that most
writing faculty *do* train their students in interpretive analysis through
discussions, class exercises, and ingenious writing assignments, it’s odd
that this goal is not expressed more explicitly through textbooks, syllabi,
or college course bulletins.

The scarcity of course descriptions or textbooks that address
interpretive analysis parallels a curious absence in contemporary
discussions about academic discourse. Current debates about academic
discourse primarily attend to questions of standard written English,
jargon, diction, and objective decorum (see Mahala & Swilky; Elbow;
Bizzell; Kuriloff). Most of these issues only superficially grapple with
what goes on in academic discourse. To my mind, an essay written in
second-person Spanglish that examines two aspects of what “ju be playin”
means in *Hamlet* would command far more intellectual prestige than a plot
summary salted with phrases like “phallic signifier.” The Spanglish
essay’s diction and verb use would certainly need attention, but the lack of
analytic invention in the second paper would be a far bigger problem. In
professional academic writing, the informal diction of some journal
articles generally belies the sophistication of these articles’ interpretive
analyses. For example, even when Peter Elbow makes a case for the place
of nonacademic writing in the university curriculum, his essay relies
heavily on analytic structure, often developing three or four insights to a
given problem in each section of his essay (135-8; 138-9; 141; 146-8).

In addition to questions of decorum, another overemphasized
component of academic discourse is the status of argument and evidence.
While the role of argument is undeniably important, I believe it is also a
secondary concern. Ideally, a writer’s arguments are discovered after an
analysis has taken place, and usually a writer’s arguments develop
simultaneously with the evidence produced through analysis. In cases
where experienced writers know what they want to argue in advance, they
often use interpretive analysis as the means of producing their evidence. In
either case, a discussion of the importance of analysis as a rhetorical (that
is, generic) and cognitive element of academic discourse has yet to be pursued by composition studies as a whole.

There are some recent noteworthy exceptions. David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen’s *Writing Analytically* (2nd ed 1999), is a sophisticated Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) primer for introducing analytic approaches to students of highly advanced reading and writing skills. Although their text is aimed above the heads of students who would benefit from it the most, it defines interpretive analysis, gives concrete examples, and demonstrates the ways it appears in different disciplines. Similarly, Ben Raffo has proposed several interrogatory methods with which writing center tutors can help students take more analytic approaches to their writing. Helen Fox’s illuminating text, *Listening to the World*, points out that the practice of critical analysis entails a highly specialized relationship to the world that most faculty learned intuitively. As a result, some faculty have difficulty negotiating those expectations with students of different cultural origins (124-5). The novelty of these texts, however, points out the limitations of recent debates about academic discourse.

**Teaching Tools**

Because most textbooks address interpretive analysis in roundabout ways, I’ve had to invent classroom exercises that foreground this skill as a central feature of academic thought and expression. Although my expository writing courses are not oriented around literature, I usually begin the first day of all my writing classes with a crash introduction to hermeneutics. At the Christian university where I teach, I usually begin the semester with a short passage from the Bible that most of the class is somewhat familiar with, such as Abraham’s attempt to sacrifice his son, Isaac. I then ask them what it means. The class then offers several interpretations, based on what they know of other parts of the Bible. Various students might assert that the meaning of Abraham’s sacrifice demonstrates 1) personal faith, 2) loyalty to God, 3) the interpretation of God’s messages, 4) a foreshadowing of Christ’s sacrifice, etc. Within 10 minutes, we have enough to write several pages of text that interpret a single passage from the Old Testament. I point out that their interpretations often rely on 1) deciding what parts of the passage are most important (breaking the text apart); 2) connecting the meaning of those pieces to other parts of the text; and 3) applying the significance of that passage to other important events in people’s lives. Each of these strategies of interpretation can produce a variety of meanings, and they all

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enrich our knowledge of what Abraham’s sacrifice means. A student with feminist interests, for example, might ask what the significance of the boychild sacrifice says about early Judaism. One of my students, who happened to be well versed in Old Testament theology, approached the problem from a historical framework, arguing that the story is an early Judaic parable whose function is to criticize the efficacy of human sacrifice. After discussion, I then explain to my students that they can perform this intellectual skill (a mental trick, really) on sacred texts, dreams, historical events, philosophical issues, politics, and math problems.

Granting the multicultural limitations of working with the tableaux of Judeo-Christian theology, sometimes I’ll ask the students to get into small groups and I’ll give them a troubling situation to interpret:

A drunken and unemployed father finds his child has been brought home by the police for shoplifting. He leans down into the child’s face and says, “you’re a worthless bum and you’ll never grow up to be anything.”

I ask them where the meaning of this scene is. The students respond with any number of interpretations, ranging from the dangers of alcohol, to child abuse, to emotional self-pity, to psychological projection. I push them to come up with at least three different interpretations but I emphasize that all of these interpretations exist simultaneously in the same event—it’s a question of what the interpreter wants to do with the problem. Our cultural beliefs about alcohol use or proper child rearing each present interesting frameworks to approach the meaning of this drama. Once, a student prefaced her interpretation by saying, “Oh, Professor Ganter, I feel so sorry for you.” The rest of the class smiled because she included me, and a guess about what my childhood was like, in her interpretation of what the class exercise meant. Fair enough!

I might also suggest a socio-political topic the students might be aware of, such as the recent decade of increased police recruitment in New York City. Some students recognize that 1) it’s part of the mayor’s attempt to improve the quality of life in the city. Other students, concerned at recent cases of police brutality and our mayor’s crackdown on immigrant street vendors and cab drivers, see it as 2) a bullying gesture to keep the poor and minorities quiet. Others interpret it as 3) part of the mayor’s plan to run for federal office on a law-and-order record. Although some students may feel more kindly toward the mayor than others, this exercise convinces them that a legitimate case could be made for any, or all three of these interpretations. I conclude the discussion by explaining that what
they’ve just done are exercises in analytic interpretation, and it is the skill all scholars perform in their critical writing. For example, in his famous study of the Declaration of Independence, Garry Wills organizes his book by simply devoting a chapter to each of his interpretative insights. One of his chapters interprets the Declaration as a moral document, the next chapter argues for the Declaration’s scientific significance, etc. Interpretive analysis is how thinkers produce whole books of meaning from the examination of relatively modest details, problems, or events.

As a brief review of the literature on writing and cognition suggests, the kinds of intellectual moves I’ve modeled in the preceding class exercises take for granted a formidable range of cognitive and expressive skills (forming generalizations, making inferences, reading comprehension) (Lipman; Meyers; Penrose & Sitko). Teaching the lower order skills on which interpretation is built is crucial, but students also need practice doing sophisticated work in analytic interpretation at the same time. Russel Durst has called attention to the great demands that analytic writing makes on students, pointing out that until the late 1980s, few studies of college writing acknowledged the significant differences between analytic and non-analytic composition. Durst shows that even when college writers are prompted to write analytic essays, they frequently fall back on discursive modes such as summary. For analysis to take place, Durst argues, students need to be able to place a text “in a broader context, establishing a frame of reference or stance outside of the text” (374). In my writing and literature classes, I ask my students to draw on outside contexts for interpretive purposes, and I also assign readings that demonstrate the skill I ask them to perform in class.

I’m fond of beginning my freshman-level composition courses with an advertisement analysis for two reasons. First, the students are generally comfortable understanding what advertising is supposed to do (purpose), and they also have a broad knowledge of the general range of advertising methods (genre). Second, as students whose primary relation to the world is shaped by images and television, it is an interpretive exercise they are accustomed to performing in their everyday lives concerning fashion and lifestyle (in contrast to interpreting sonnets, philosophical problems, or political history). The writing assignment, though, frequently surprises them. I ask them to choose one significant detail from the ad and explain at least three ways that detail helps sell a product. One of my favorite in-class training images is a Newport cigarette commercial, popular several years ago, where an attractive black couple sits on a park bench with a saxophone in their laps. The man holds the base of the sax while he pushes
the mouthpiece into his girlfriend’s mouth. How does the saxophone sell cigarettes? The class quickly recognizes that the sax suggests 1) that these Newport smokers have healthy lungs, and 2) that Newport smokers have cool hobbies. It’s promoting ideals of health and artistic achievement. Eventually, one of the more courageous students brings up the sexual innuendo of the instrument’s placement and the couple’s apparent affection for each other. In this context, the slogan, “Alive with Pleasure,” begins to take on a different meaning. In their explications, I ask them to connect their interpretations of the detail they choose to other parts of the ad (such as its bold green border, the slogan), their knowledge of cigarette advertising in general, or the role of consumerism in people’s lives. To interpret why the saxophone in the cigarette advertisement is meaningful, the students have to draw on cultural beliefs about health and the environment, music and highbrow culture, and racial and sexual relations. Although this exercise in conceptual exegesis is admittedly simplistic, it prepares them for later assignments which require the interpretation of less propagandistic, non-visual phenomena.

The key to making these exercises work is to focus initially on interpretation rather than on evaluation. Most of the students are pretty comfortable giving three reasons why metal detectors should or shouldn’t be used in school, or whether it is ethical for advertisers to use pornography to sell their products. While not bereft of analytic aspects, the intellectual terrain of these sorts of questions features several well-trod pathways, and the students don’t have to think beyond their preconceptions. That sort of exercise leads to dull five-paragraph essays. Initially, I try to keep the students focused on asking what problems mean, rather than asking them for immediate evaluative judgements or counter arguments. What does the decision to ban certain books from high schools say about the students? School administration? City government?

Fictional literature can provide a useful training ground for analysis because it obliges students to articulate the meaning of given passages for themselves. When my classes read a poem or a story, I ask small student groups to choose a passage from the previous night’s reading and come up with three explanations why it’s important to understanding the rest of the text. Their job is to explain several different ways a given passage is interesting or meaningful, and they’re encouraged to refer to other parts of the text for support, or to connect the scene’s importance to any historical or theoretical frameworks they wish. They then teach the rest of the class. To help them visualize what this assignment is asking for, I ask them to imagine that their younger sibling in high school wants to know why those
women start hollering when they drive over the creek bed in Sandra Cisneros’s short story, “Woman Hollering Creek.” Their response would sound like this: “well, the yelling is important for a few reasons. First, it shows . . .”

I also employ critical readings that supplement the material under discussion and which demonstrate the skill I want them to perform. Although his vocabulary is daunting to most freshman, Cornel West’s writing is well suited to a multidisciplinary writing environment. More important, however, West’s style of expression has a clearly defined analytic organization. West’s rhetorical strategy almost always focuses on an issue and breaks it down into several significant levels of meaning. For example, in the following passage West describes the ways elite America attempted to ignore minority anger in the wake of the police assault on Rodney King in 1991. I’ve inserted bracketed numerals into his text to highlight the layers of his analysis:

The major American-elite response to [black rage] was to [1] reduce tragic black persons into pathetic black victims and to [2] redirect the channels of black rage in and to black working-class and poor communities. The reduction was done by [1] making black poor people clients of a welfare system that both sustained and degraded them; [2] by viewing black middle-class people as questionable and stigmatized beneficiaries of affirmative-action programs that fueled their identity crises; [3] and by rendering black working people [. . .] as nearly nonexistent, even as their standard and quality of living significantly declined. (“Rage”35-6)

West is basically saying that privileged America intensified black rage by trying to ignore it. While I’m intrigued by his argument, I find his method of analyzing the problem equally interesting. His mind works like a razor, dividing larger ideas into finer discriminations of meaning. His last three points are really an elaboration of his first point, the different ways tragic black experience is “reduced”—an analysis within an analysis. Even further, his comment that the welfare system “both sustained and degraded” its clients is a deft tertiary analysis of the paradoxical mechanics of social marginalization and the “reduction” of black experience. In both his speaking and his writing, West usually advertises the major shifts he makes between levels of interpretation with a first, second, third approach, often performing secondary analyses while working with each point, as I’ve demonstrated. As even a cursory perusal of his published work shows, the major organizational device of his
critical expression—either on the level of chapter organization, paragraphing, or sentence structure—is this type of analytic rhetoric. For example, in The American Evasion of Philosophy, West's first chapter is organized around identifying three premises of Emerson’s brand of pragmatism. Likewise, the narrative fabric of Race Matters is composed almost entirely of critical analysis. His chapters isolate eight problematic issues in U.S. race relations that he wants to further analyze (affirmative action; shared black and Jewish histories of subjugation and diaspora; views of black sexuality, etc). Within his chapters, West then attacks each issue with several interpretive insights, usually headed with a first, second, third, fourth style of organization. Given his theological training, it is also no coincidence that West advocates prophetic criticism. Beyond West’s interests in moral vision, prophecy describes the cognitive and rhetorical practice of scholars who systematically produce meaning from the events they study.

Because West’s vocabulary is heavy going for non-liberal arts majors, I like to use journalism, student writing, and other types of critical non-fiction in my expository writing classes. Written in accessible language, newspaper editorials and magazine columns are good practical demonstrations of prophecying for students with limited reading skills. Whenever possible I’ll assign a descriptive news article, paired with a news analysis or editorial about the same event. The contrast helps students see the difference between description and interpretation, a generic distinction which is new to many novice readers and writers. (Andrew Sullivan, well known for his frank treatment of risqué social topics, should be better known for his classical analytic technique—his articles offer lively demonstrations of how to set up a controversial fact or problem and then systematically derive several interpretations from it.)

Critical histories also work well for introducing students to interpretive analysis. History is an excellent overall genre for college-wide expository writing requirements because of its multidisciplinary content and because it features a huge catalogue of useful rhetorical techniques—description, narration, quotation, and analysis. For example, a text like Howard Zinn’s A People’s History of the United States, written in lay English, features a variety of analytic passages, particularly toward the end of his chapters. In contrast to popularly anthologized historical selections like Barbara Tuchman’s account of the black plague, which is gorgeously descriptive but not very analytic, Zinn interprets his facts, he doesn’t just describe them. In choosing course readings, I look for passages where an analysis explicitly takes place on a given page, such as,
“The response to unionization was significant for two reasons.” I like to contrast these obvious examples with sections where the analysis, though present, is not so clearly manifest.

Surprisingly, however, most students have difficulty identifying obviously analytic passages—they simply have little experience paying attention to those sorts of rhetorical announcements. If they can’t see it in someone else’s writing, then they probably don’t know that they should be doing it in their own. My discovery of student blindness to analytic rhetoric has transformed the goals of my teaching over the past few years.

In negotiation with my students at a wealthy private university where I adjuncted, and where the students are already literate members of what Jeff Smith has called the “overclass” (302), I’ve used West’s Race Matters, John Berger’s Ways of Seeing, The New Yorker, the yearly Best American Essays, and Lolita as course readings. (The belletristic choices were at their behest, not mine, but I agreed to readings that I thought I could work with.) At some point in these texts, the authors often provide an analysis of a person, problem, or idea. I ask students to identify these passages in class. I also ask what kinds of social assumptions seem to have generated a writer’s approach to the topic in the first place, which asks the students to look for the contexts of meaning that frame the author’s analyses.

Teaching advanced exposition at a wealthy school is very rewarding but I’d like to point out that financially privileged students have generally inherited habits of critical analysis as their birthright. It’s part of what their socio-economic class does—their parents are managers, problem-solvers, and thinkers, not instrumental mechanics and clerks. They hear their parents analyze ideas and interpret problems at the dinner table. It’s a form of expression spoken everywhere in their lives and an important means of that class’s social and economic advancement. The challenge in my teaching is to get my less privileged students aware of a skill that they all have but which they never thought about enhancing. One reason why we sometimes identify students as under-prepared is because they have simply been socialized away from analysis by community environments that don’t encourage that kind of talk as a useful means of professional success.

Frames of Meaning and Diversity

The direction that interpretative analysis takes is contingent on the backgrounds and on what I call the frames of meaning of its practitioners. Analysis is not necessarily a bourgeois intellectual skill (exegesis is a
fairly universal human practice), but a student educated amidst middle-class ideals of possession, independence, and upward mobility might propose different interpretations of a problem than a member of a different class, sex, or nationality. In Wayne Booth’s recent article on ethical teaching, he recommends Gerald Graff’s philosophy of harnessing the conflicts between texts of differing value systems for a pedagogical purpose. By playing books off each other, and by asking students to weigh the differing ethical systems existing in a single text, Booth argues that students might come to understand themselves better (50-4). I’m sympathetic to his suggestion that the goal of pedagogy is critical exposure to a variety of points of view rather than indoctrination. Similarly, a writer’s analyses are enriched by the extent to which different and surprising frameworks are brought to bear on problem solving.

The incorporation of a diversity of points of view into the pedagogy of the classroom is one way to enhance our students’ analytic options. Phyllis van Slyck, employing Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of the “contact zone,” advocates a classroom where “a variety of world literatures, and the cultures they reflect, are discussed, critiqued, and written about in a thematically coherent context” (155). The yield of van Slyck’s proposal in terms of our students’ critical awareness is an enlargement of their experiential frameworks—the frames of meaning in which analytic interpretation take place. Van Slyck argues that diversity itself is a key part of developing a critical posture toward the world:

I want my students to acquire the analytic skills that will bring about a reflective, dialogic approach to any given text and to the cultural issues it raises, and I want them to feel that we (all of the members of the class, including the instructor) have shared in the construction and execution of this dialogue. This can be achieved only if I identify myself, like everyone else, as an individual speaking from a specific subject position and as someone who does not have all the answers. The repositioning suggested by this model requires a constant vigilance about one’s own belief systems; that is, we all need to become decentered subjects. (153, emphasis added)

One needn’t be a card-carrying decentered subject to admire van Slyck’s pedagogical goals. When van Slyck associates dialogue with analysis, she’s basically defending a Socratic tradition of education. By putting a number of cultural perspectives in dialogue, van Slyck suggests that her students will develop a more critical eye. Although I am skeptical of the idea that the promotion of some innocuous ideal of cultural diversity is the
best or only way of enhancing our students' critical capacities (and I don't think van Slyck is saying that), a dialogic classroom environment encourages active learning habits from students and places their own critical consciousness at the center of their own educations. One textbook that admirably exploits the critical potential for such cross-reading practices, and which balances analytic writing selections with other genres, is David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky's *Ways of Reading*. (Like Rosenwasser and Stephen's *Writing Analytically*, however, this text demands a very high initial level of reading and writing proficiency).

For these reasons, creative writing can enhance our student's critical awareness—personal essays, fiction, and other genres of purportedly non-analytic writing can provide students with new frameworks with which to make meaning. Exposure to a variety of cultural and intellectual frameworks is, after all, the rationale behind most composition anthologies from the 1960s to the present. The key, however, is in teaching habits of analytic exposition in the first place. The problem with the canon of essays by George Orwell, E.B. White, Joan Didion, and Maya Angelou is that they show more than they tell. Or rather, their *telling* is gracefully covered up, suggested, or implied. As Peter Elbow has observed, autobiographies and other types of expressive writing are often filled with analysis, but the university curriculum rarely asks students to conduct analysis through these genres of bellettristic writing (it's also very hard to do). No wonder our students are puzzled by the disjunction between course readings and academic writing assignments. While I'm fond of the idea that university writing requirements loosen up to allow a variety of expressive genres (Bridwell-Bowles; Owens), I also expect the university system to produce critical thinkers who are able to explain why something is important or dangerous. That's a skill rooted in interpretive explanation, not just the rendering of experience.

**Analytic Literacy and the Future**

In the preceding section, I've tried to suggest the value of using allegedly non-analytic genres in the classroom and to acknowledge the complex cultural backgrounds that shape the direction that an interpretive analysis takes. Analysis can't be taught without the simultaneous introduction of cultural beliefs and practices that generate the purpose of an interpretation. For instance, a student unfamiliar with neo-Marxist philosophy probably won't be inclined to grasp the significance of some kinds of class conflicts. Patricia Bizzell, among others, has pointed out basic materials of cultural literacy that create the most rudimentary
frameworks for interpretive writing, such as knowledge of Bible stories and commonly recognized patterns in Western history (36; 142-3). But multicultural literacy is far from an answer in itself. Cultural literacy, understood as an archive of facts and beliefs, is relative, and all of our students already have well-developed frames of meaning with which to perform their own analyses. Surely, part of the business of the university system is to expand those frames of meaning, but more importantly, its business should be emphasizing the cognitive practice of interpretation itself. The most important cultural literacy is not the acquisition of facts and beliefs, but rather, the habit of interpreting them.

In reference to my opening comments about religious exegetical practice, I’d like to return to the most commonly understood definition of the word, prophecy. Prophecy, whether it derives from the reading of stars, cat entrails, sacred texts, or court rulings, is an attempt to change the future through compelling interpretation. It’s a creative act that explicitly assaults the bounds of knowledge by bringing different frames of meaning to bear on facts. In other words, prophecy is an academic genre that changes the world. As Stanley Aronowitz has recently argued, if we want our colleges to be something other than fancy trade schools to supply yesterday’s intellectual machinery, we need to encourage students to think transgressively and to challenge professional authority (143). The critical interpretation of authority and fact is how the future is changed. By advocating greater attention to interpretive analysis in our writing classrooms, I’m not suggesting that we train our students to write like clerical pedants. Rather, as my epigraph suggests, I’m asking that we help them “find sermons in the most unpromising texts.” After all, it’s the very least we expect from each other as public thinkers and writers.

Queens, New York

Works Cited


