

# What Does It Mean to Learn? William Bennett, the Educational Testing Service, and a Praxis of the Sublime

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I must admit that, despite my best intentions, my mind wandered as I read William Bennett's latest contribution to the debate about family values, *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*. It's not that *The Index* lacks a certain drama; indeed, the endless stream of statistics, bar and pie charts, quotes and quips from Plato to Hillary Clinton are run together in such a way that they tell and re-tell a troubling story about a once-great-nation fallen into decline. And yet, despite the barrage of depressing information about violence (up), teenage sex (up), television use (up), divorce (up), I found myself thinking not about the collapse of cultural standards, but about that other family man and teacher, Thomas Gradgrind, intoning, "Fact, fact, fact" before the blank faces of the schoolchildren in Dickens' *Hard Times*. Like Dickens' schoolmaster, Bennett has a profound faith in the power of facts to order the souls of the populace: one could even say that *The Index* itself assumes a form of Gradgrindian pedagogy by presenting its "facts and figures on the state of American society" without anything so distracting or overtly interpretive as authorial commentary. Within the world of this text, it seems, facts are understood to speak for themselves, and one would no more argue with them than one would argue with the actuarial tables in blue books that line Gradgrind's study.

This granted, I'd like to sidestep for the moment Bennett's assertion that his data shows our government's misguided effort to be "more than an auxiliary in the development of a free people's moral disposition and character" (12), in order to consider the limitations of the mode of presentation on which Bennett relies—a mode I call, for the sake of convenience, a "pedagogy of obedience." Within this pedagogy as it is practiced in *The Index*, the social world, with all its lived complexities, incoherences, gaps, and contradictions, is flattened out and translated into a series of discrete, measurable events: rates on teenage pregnancies, juvenile violence, drug use, time in front of the television, etc. Since the text provides no overt commentary about this information, the reader's job is to remain fixed on *what* has happened, as detailed in the facts and figures, and to put aside questions about *how* the statistics were collected, *which* statistics have been presented, and *what* other statistics or interpretations might have been

called on. With these lines of inquiry shut off, the ideal reader of *The Index* finds in Bennett's statistical display objective proof that schools, families, churches, neighborhoods, and other social and civic organizations have all failed to teach the nation's children to demonstrate "civility and respect for legitimate authority" (12). In this way, the argument and the pedagogy of Bennett's text work hand in hand: while the book presents statistics that track the moral decay of our social infrastructure, it responds to this problem with a pedagogical approach that teaches its readers to bow to the cited authorities.

We see this, for example, in Bennett's section on "Education," where he cites Albert Shanker's assertion that "ninety-five percent of the kids who go to college in the United States would not be admitted to college anywhere else in the world" (89). Within the constellation of Bennett's statistics on the state of education, Shanker's statement is presented as a factual assessment of a decline in academic standards that has apparently racked our nation. But why would an average reader accept the implication that our schools have failed, when he or she has nothing more to go on here than the information that Shanker is president of the American Federation of Teachers and a footnote placing the quote in an article entitled, "Schools 'Really Bad' Says AFT Leader"? Why couldn't this statistic be seen as proof of an ongoing, relatively successful effort to democratize access to higher education in the United States? Is the reader really meant to admire other educational systems where colleges and universities are restricted to a small fraction of the total populace? Rather than pursue this line of inquiry, which might serve to alleviate the sense that our educational system has failed because it has become more accessible, the reader is invited to recognize that the speaker in question is a person of higher authority, an elected official, an expert whose insights warrant not so much thoughtful consideration as unquestioned respect. That the statistic itself seems to have been pulled out of thin air is presumably of little moment at a time when our most pressing business is getting out the news about this latest version of our educational crisis.

What it means to learn within this system, then, is to accept what has been handed down by one's superiors, to repeat their findings, to grant the assumptions behind their facts and figures, to chant their conclusions. "Rush is Right," as the bumper stickers say, so let it be known: SAT scores are down, spending on education is up. Aside from spreading this news, though, it's hard to see exactly what one is to meant do with such information, particularly since Bennett's charts of SAT scores versus state expenditures reveal that "there is no systematic correlation between spending on education and student achievement" (83). While Bennett is content to move on to disciplinary problems in the schools after this pronouncement, the reader is left to wonder what to make of the data about scores and spending. Should one demand less spending, since it doesn't seem to matter anyway? Or perhaps less test taking, since it's clearly a waste of money?

If Bennett's text offers no detailed solutions to the problems it has charted, it does dramatize in a particularly straightforward way the dynamic interplay

that exists between systems of examination, dominant definitions of learning, and active pedagogical practice. Within Bennett's text, this relationship gets worked out in the following way: a decline in test scores marks an undeniable decline in "learning," which manifests itself most pressingly as a decline in obedience, which is shown in turn by a rise in both the number and the severity of disciplinary problems in the schools. The solution, implicit in this formulation, is this: reduce government spending and increase discipline, which should produce greater obedience and higher test scores. This is a familiar argument, and its reign as a certain form of common sense is unlikely to be disturbed by a counter-argument attacking its assumptions about what passes for learning within such a system.

Since such interchanges do little to alter how higher education goes about its business, I would like to deviate from this familiar path of argument and focus, instead, on the ways in which the "pedagogy of obedience" has been institutionalized as a dominant form and concern of our educational practice. With this in mind, I will begin by detailing one set of institutional mechanisms that has been designed to define and measure what it means to learn in school, in general, and to regulate what constitutes acceptable acts of reading and writing, in particular. From there, I will then explore another way to respond to the question posed by my title, "What does it mean to learn?" Thus, although I've begun with a consideration of how Bennett's text constructs and educates its ideally obedient reader, I would like to turn now to more material examples of how learning to read and write has been linked to a pedagogy of obedience. And this requires that we revisit that particular object of critique in Dickens' *Hard Times*—the monitorial method of instruction, which dominated popular education in Great Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century.

### **Institutionalizing the Pedagogy of Obedience: From James Lancaster's Borough Road School to the Educational Testing Service**

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the British government had yet to become formally involved in the business of educating either the poor or members of the lower middle class. This task was taken up, instead, by two separate private societies: The British and Foreign School Society, established in 1808, which offered nondenominational education, and the National Society, founded in 1811, which was allied with the Church of England and proffered both general and religious instruction. Both societies relied on the "monitorial" method of instruction to fulfill their philanthropic missions. The method was reputedly imported from India to England by Dr. Andrew Bell, who described seeing in the colonies "a youth of eleven years of age, with his little assistants under him, teaching upwards of fifty boys" (Hyndman 17). Bell's reasons for promoting this system, where a single teacher watched as his assistants monitored the responses of his students, were economic rather than pedagogic: in a flight of fancy, Bell dreamed of the day when "a single master, who, if able and diligent, could, without difficulty, conduct ten contiguous schools, each consisting of a thousand

scholars” (Godsen 2). What the single master at the hub of this ideal institution would do “without difficulty” with his ten thousand students was issue instructions. The student monitors would see to it that the master’s orders were carried out as they swept through the ordered rows of students. It’s the bureaucrat’s ultimate fantasy, where all is order and obedience, hierarchy and control.

Although Joseph Lancaster was never able to achieve the ratio between teachers and students that Bell envisioned, he did realize a respectably cost-effective relationship of one teacher to five hundred students at his famous Borough Road School during the first decades of the nineteenth century. His favored method of instruction is singled out by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* as a vivid example of panopticism at work in the school system. Foucault describes Lancaster’s pedagogy as follows:

[F]irst the oldest pupils were entrusted with tasks involving simple supervision, then of checking work, then of teaching; in the end, all the time of all the pupils was occupied either with teaching or with being taught. The school became a machine for learning, in which each pupil, each level and each moment, if correctly combined, were permanently utilized in the general process of teaching. (165)

The figure that accompanies Foucault’s discussion nicely illustrates this arrangement where the single master sits at the front of and slightly above a large number of boys, arranged according to height, dutifully seated in rows facing him. Behind the master and visible to the students is the clock, which controls all movements and activities in the classroom. To the master’s right is a row of young boys seated in an area reserved for newcomers, “dunces,” and the chronically inattentive—those students, in other words, in need of especially close and multiple surveillances. Monitors circulate through the room inspecting the work the other students have done, performing an almost identical gesture in unison. One student, as if to illustrate the inherent unruliness of this mass, looks away from his lesson and directly at the viewer, in an action unseen by the monitors but one that nevertheless falls safely under the gaze of the schoolmaster. To be a student within this system is to be seen, and the only way to be seen without fear of censure is to have successfully learned to stay within the bounds of the modelled behavior.

Whether or not Lancaster actually believed that the ability to read could be readily translated into an ability to teach any subject, his reliance on the monitorial method was necessitated by an overarching problem that impeded the expansion of public education in Great Britain during this period—namely, mutually reinforcing critical shortages of both trained instructors to staff new classrooms and adequate funding to build new schools. As long as the societies that educated Britain’s poorest citizens had to rely exclusively on donations to fund their schools and to pay their instructors, they had no choice but to employ a system of instruction that delivered its educational product to the most students at the lowest cost. Or, to put it another way, so long as the British government declined to fund this sector of public education (as it did until the 1830s), the monitorial method was insured its place as the dominant teaching practice used

to educate the nation's poor. And within such a system, what its students were taught was that learning principally involved the replication of modelled activities and that the reward for being able to reproduce the modelled activities was steady advancement through a hierarchy structured by multiple and reciprocal monitorings. In short, without outside intervention from either the government or some competing pedagogical approach—the very kind of interventions that Foucault would argue signal the further expansion of disciplinary power and that Bennett, no doubt, would decry as overstepping government's auxiliary role—Britain's poorest students were sentenced to work within an educational organization whose very structure was designed with *only* disciplinary and economic concerns in mind.

It's a ghastly system, but one that, for my purposes, provides a provocative example of how, in the past, an interest in educating the masses was readily transformed into a comprehensive pedagogical apparatus for fostering obedience. But, I also recognize that it is also a fairly easy target, for who is likely to come forward to defend such a method of instruction? It's a relic of the past, an historical curiosity worthy of a stall in the Museum of Pedagogical Practices, perhaps, but nothing more. This, at least, was my own reaction to my historical research, until I learned that this "machine for learning" is not out of commission, but rather continues to operate, providing a general pedagogical blueprint for the nation's largest organized effort to train teachers in the assessment of student writing—the Educational Testing Service. What brought me to the Educational Testing Service's summer grading marathon of Advance Placement exams was my abiding interest in the questions I've raised here: where do the statistics that bolster the perpetual sense of educational crisis come from? How is learning transformed within systems of education into a product that can be measured and evaluated? And how do these institutional mechanisms of assessment, in turn, influence pedagogical practice, in general, and the teaching of reading and writing, specifically? Grading the AP English exams for ETS enabled me to see how the answer to these questions has been translated into an institutionalized system for assessing student writing that is, as the AP literature everywhere proclaims, both "consistent and reliable."<sup>1</sup>

In order to assure that each of the exams is graded according to the same standard, ETS disrupts many of the conventions that govern assessment in the classroom today. At ETS, the act of responding to a student text is reduced to the solitary assignation of a number between one and nine; the grader's assessment is entirely public and subject to both peer and superior review; and, finally, the contextual nature of the interchange between the student text and the teacher's response is shorn off, leaving only the raw act of having the grader place the student text on a pre-established grid. Everything in the process has been streamlined to insure that the most essays are graded in the least amount of time with, to be sure, the greatest level of "accuracy." This is accomplished by establishing a hierarchy of linked monitorings strikingly similar to those used in the schools of Bell and Lancaster: all the readers for an individual question

are placed in the same room, where they are divided up into small groups and assigned to Table Leaders. Each group stays with its Table Leader for the entire grading session, with the “acorns” (as first-time readers are called in reference to the College Board’s logo) generally placed on either side of their leader. The Question Leader sits at the head of the room underneath a clock, monitoring the progress of the individual tables and announcing lunch and stretching breaks. The Question Leader and the Table Leaders are periodically called from the room to meet with the Chief Faculty Consultant, who provides an ongoing statistical breakdown of how each individual reader in the room is doing—the number of essays read, the range and frequency of scores assigned, comparisons of scores assigned to the same student across the three exam questions, etc. At this time, erratic readers and readers who are not assigning the full range of scores are identified and strategies for addressing broader, room-wide trends are planned out.<sup>2</sup>

From a certain perspective, this system is a marvel both to watch and to participate in. There’s something peaceful and reassuring about the way it hums along, churning year after year through undifferentiated masses of student essays and producing, in the end, a tidy, organized whole, with each essay in its “proper” place. And yet, it’s worth observing that the same appearance of order could be achieved by assigning scores to the essays at random, respecting only the distributional demands of the bell curve. Introducing this element of chance into the process would, of course, spell disaster for ETS, which is in the business of producing assessments that *reliably* measure the ability of individual students to place out of entry-level instruction in college. Thus, the hierarchical monitoring is only half of the ETS equation; while it ensures steady progress through the mass of papers and allows for critical interventions when grading glitches occur, it is further linked to a program of instruction that guides all readers to use the *same* system of evaluation in the same way throughout the entire grading process. To this end, the first day of grading is spent “norming” the readers, a process whereby model student responses are read and their affixed grades explained. Working from sheets that describe the differences between each score in relation to the essay question, the readers then begin to assess practice essays, determining their scores and comparing their results with the other readers at their table. While there is a good bit of discussion this first day about how to read and evaluate the essays, the primary function of this work is to get the readers to accept the scores previously assigned to the practice essays by the Table Leaders. This goal is realized when the readers have internalized the system of assessment developed by the Chief Faculty Consultant, the Question Leader, and the Table Leaders. All discussion is carried out to this end: questions, which are rare, tend to be informational, “Why is this a 4 and not a 6?” What is never interrogated is the logic that underwrites the system of assessment or the essay assignment itself; discussion of these matters, which surfaces occasionally throughout the week in the cafeteria and in the hallways, is seen, quite rightly, to slow things down in the grading room.

In moving from the use of the monitorial method in the early nineteenth century as a “machine for learning” to the application of that same method at ETS today as a “machine for assessing,” I may seem to have strayed some distance from the question posed by my title, “What does it mean to learn?” Indeed, in the language of ETS my essay, at this point, may have wandered so far afield that it is now “off topic” and worthy of only the lowest possible score, the non-registering dash. While one of my overriding concerns in this essay is to illustrate the virtues of pursuing thoughts down serpentine paths and the pleasures learning can afford when understood not simply as a project of reproduction but as a process of unexpected juxtapositions as well, I am also interested in tracing out what it might mean to learn within the ETS system of assessment. With this in mind, following Bennett’s lead, we can start with some facts and figures that suggest the exam’s power to both shape and reflect the learning experience of high school students across the nation. In 1993, 170,000 students sat for ETS’ English Language and English Literature exams. According to the *Advanced Placement Course Description: English*, AP courses “are offered in more than 10,000 high schools in every state in the United States, every province and territory in Canada, and 63 other countries. They are recognized by nearly 2,900 U.S. and foreign colleges and universities, which grant credit, appropriate placement, or both to students who have performed satisfactorily on AP examinations” (i). Aside from the cultural capital that students and teachers gain from being involved in AP courses, there are financial incentives from both above and below to encourage students to take these exams: for roughly seventy dollars, the student has a chance to save the cost of up to six credits’ tuition by placing out of first-year composition and entry-level literature courses. And, as a number of high school teachers explained to me at the assessment site, in some states individual schools have their budgets increased on the basis of how many AP classes they offer, since such courses are seen to provide a clear indication of a given school’s commitment to “excellence.”

It is, of course, in the best interest of all involved parties that students do well in these courses and on their exams, which is one important reason why so many dedicated high school teachers give up a piece of their summers to grade for ETS. In exchange for a nominal honorarium, the teachers learn the shape of the exams, the types of questions asked, and, most importantly, what, in the eyes of the examiners, distinguishes a good response from a bad one. Teachers may further avail themselves of the annual booklets put out by ETS that analyze the previous year’s questions and provide samples of exemplary essays and extended commentary explaining the rationale behind the system of assessment. They may also draw on the AP’s *Teacher’s Guide to Advanced Placement Course in English Language and Composition*, which offers tips on how to design AP courses and sample course outlines. Armed with all this information, the teachers can then return to their classrooms and prepare their students to write the kinds of responses that are mostly likely to receive high marks from the examiners.<sup>3</sup>

Measuring the effect that this examination system has on actual classroom practice is beyond the scope of this study, but it is safe to say that the ETS trumpets its statistics on the number of high schools and colleges involved with the program to advertize the extent of the AP exam's influence. For our purposes, though, what is most significant to note here is the way in which a method for evaluating response becomes, itself, a system for generating response. The examiners model responses for the teachers who, in turn, model responses for their students, in a reproductive chain that is meant to define what constitutes "good writing" at the national level. All of this is fine, I suppose, as long as you agree with the system of assessment and think that the examination itself prompts the kind of writing that is or should be required of students in first-year composition and literature courses. As I sat there in San Antonio, however, working my way through essay after essay that sought to analyze how a three paragraph excerpt from Joan Didion conveyed the author's view about the Santa Ana winds, I couldn't help but feel that there was almost no relationship between the disembodied, mechanized results of the examinees' hastily dashed off studies in style and the kind of writing I seek to have my students produce in my courses. Specifically, in this testing situation, the students stuck doggedly to the instructions that they "might consider such stylistic elements as diction, imagery, syntax, structure, tone, and selection of detail" in formulating their responses (*English Language and Composition*; emphasis added). As a result of these instructions, none of the essays I read opted to use Didion's essay to explore what it would mean to accept the "deeply mechanistic view of human behavior" that she writes of, for instance, nor did they risk going off topic by having Didion serve as a springboard to other issues (much the way Didion herself uses Raymond Chandler in the selected passage). Instead, the students, knowing their place, praised the organizational brilliance of the three paragraph excerpt; they shuddered dramatically at Didion's descriptions of the wind's powers; they sighed in disappointment along with her at science's unsatisfactory explanation of how the winds work their evil magic. As the last link in this hierarchy of obedience, the students fulfilled their assigned task, struggling to say what was expected of them, while making sure to leave their doubts and questions about the work unrecorded.

The relevance of the monitorial method of instruction to a consideration of what it means to learn, then, is that it vividly illustrates the consequences of relying on a pedagogy that defines reading and writing primarily in terms of obedience. In a system where teachers either do not or are not allowed to question the criteria used to define good writing, students learn to leave those questions unasked themselves: their job, instead, is to read the model essay placed before them and to replicate the modelled commentary on that essay. Not too surprisingly, the test rewards those students most highly who most know their place: those who have set pieces to offer for the exam's "open" question and those who can articulate appropriately pious attitudes about the writing samples. High scores go to those essays that speak convincingly of writing's power to move us to a consideration



of the eternal verities or that compellingly detail the author's effective use of language in evoking a powerful emotional response: high scores, in other words, for writing that participates in the dog and pony show of literary appreciation.

With this in mind, it is worth noting that, of the twelve hundred essays I assessed during my time in San Antonio, not one student argued against Didion's views about nature or criticized her stylistic choices as inappropriate, ineffective, or unworthy of study. Nor did a single student essay go beyond the questioner's concern with style to consider, for instance, the possible cultural and political significance of the fact that Didion's piece about an evil wind blowing through L.A. was written in 1968. Nor, finally, did a single response I read suggest that the exam itself might be flawed in some fundamental way. Nothing even close to this occurred. Indeed, of the sixty exams I graded that were either blank or consisted of no more than two or three sentences, not one of these writers elected to throw off the collar for a moment and, if nothing else, release some steam about how the exam positioned the students as mere admirers of their superiors. Thus, when I picture the student who sat for this three hour exam, opened the test booklet to the first page, and wrote only the words, "Why am I so fucking stupid?" I see evidence not of resistance, but of the consequences of internalizing the rationale of this approach. In this case, the test has served its purpose of confirming a larger, more general institutional assessment of the student's mental abilities. Consequently, even in this apparently defiant act, we find the writer bowed in obedience; the student has learned his or her place in the system and that place is to accept the designation that he or she is a failure.

Students like this one don't disappear, of course. They join the rest of those who either didn't take the exam or didn't ace it and end up being placed in first year composition courses around the country. They bring with them not only this internalized system of shame, but the whole set of assumptions this system is based on as well, including the sense that the primary function of student writing is to reproduce admiration of a professional writer's text. There are other ways to read and write than those imagined by the AP exam and other ways to learn than by obedience and repetition, of course. Before turning to these alternatives, however, I hope at this point to have teased to the surface the recursive relationship that exists between systems of assessment and the production of student writing. In this instance, the answer to the question, "what does it mean to learn," is, perhaps solipsistically, to acquire the ability to anticipate and respond to the demands, codes, and conventions of the dominant examination system. If tests always simultaneously solicit and monitor responses, transforming the results into a hierarchical pattern and distributing rewards accordingly, the very obviousness of this observation has as yet served to conceal its significance, which lies in the suggestion that there are always at least two teachers in the classroom: the ostensible instructor and the dominant system of examination. Within the pedagogy of obedience, these two teachers collapse in on one another and become indistinguishable: as the AP guide says in its section on "Setting and Maintaining Standards for the Reading," "to prevent

the exercise of personal or whimsical judgments, all the teachers who score the essays subscribe to a set of common standards and conform consistently to a prescribed regimen" (24). In this modernist utopia, then, the impersonal is elevated to the heavens, the teacher and the examination become identical, and all interested parties treat each other with the appropriate level of respect and civility.

### **Acknowledged and Overstepped Boundaries: Imagining a Pedagogy of Exploration**

If it is undeniably true that any act of assessment requires obedience both from the examiner and the examinee, then to speak of an institutionalized alternative to the "pedagogy of obedience" may seem nothing more a fanciful indulgence. After all, let's consider the facts. It is an inescapable fact that all courses at accredited institutions, regardless of the pedagogical practices used by individual instructors, terminate in some formal evaluation of each student's performance. Assessment, whether through multiple choice exams, short essays, or portfolio review, is here to stay. And yet, it is also a fact that teachers of literature and composition have commitments besides getting students to notice the skillful deployment of rhetorical strategies in the texts of admired writers. And it is a related fact that working conditions in the teaching profession tend to provide a level of autonomy that allow for the possibility of teaching students to attend to more in their reading than the author's style and to aim for more in their writing than the production of seamlessly persuasive essays. Fact, fact, fact. Simply stating the facts that suggest we have some room to move pedagogically is no more likely to produce change in the ways literature and composition are taught than is the publication of a haphazard series of pie and bar charts about education in the United States.

Near the end of *Hard Times*, Thomas Gradgrind himself comes to realize that his utilitarian pedagogy, with its moral calculus of pleasures and pains, can neither help him to understand his children's actions nor can it assist him in protecting them from the potentially dire consequences of their deeds. To learn how to do these things, Gradgrind must turn to Sissy Jupe, the circus girl who is humiliated in the opening scene of *Hard Times* because her experientially based ways of knowing the world are invisible to her examiners. What Gradgrind comes to learn from Sissy is that facts have no utility unless they can be manipulated to suggest a realm of possibility beyond themselves. It is, after all, not the schoolmaster's blue books of statistics that allow young Tom Gradgrind to escape from the law and his sister Louisa to elude certain disgrace; it is, rather, Sissy's ability to imagine alternative solutions to these seemingly foregone conclusions. The alternative to a pedagogy of obedience, Dickens suggests, lies in the use of the imagination or the fancy, a faculty whose very nature is to elude both assessment and a strictly regimented system of instruction grounded in immediately verifiable data.

Of course, one could say that, by the end of *Hard Times*, Dickens has stacked the deck so heavily against Gradgrindian pedagogy that he's made it impossible for anyone to speak of its possible virtues. And, similarly, it could be claimed, with some accuracy, that I've done the same thing by naming the approach I've discussed here the "pedagogy of obedience." At times, it seems that this problem is endemic to the topic of teaching, as evidenced by the alternatives that populate the landscape, where we find, for example, Berthoff's "pedagogy of knowing" versus the "pedagogy of exhortation," Giroux's "pedagogy of possibility" versus an implied alternative that I like to call "the pedagogy of despair," and, of course, Freire's "pedagogy of liberation" versus the discipline's favorite whipping boy, "the banking concept of education." And yet, as Donna Dunbar-Odom has recently argued, the "liberatory" pedagogies associated with these terms have tended to devolve into their own regimes of truth—their own, if you will, "pedagogies of obedience"—with certain writerly acts qualifying, for instance, as the right kind of resistance and others registering only as a failure to engage in the common struggle against oppression. And so we find ourselves once again in this bind: if it is inescapable that all pedagogical practice demands a level of cooperation from its students, and it surely is, then the very suggestion of an alternative to the pedagogy of obedience, whatever its appellation, may seem not only paradoxical, but impracticable within an institutional setting.

The only way out of this impasse is to recognize that there is no pure alternative within the academy to the pedagogy of obedience: whatever model one comes up with will always, inevitably, be partly captured by the overriding need to regulate, organize, and evaluate the responses students produce. In other words, every "liberatory" pedagogy necessarily has moments of practice which are indistinguishable from "banking-concept" pedagogies. Thus, rather than try to escape this dialectical bind, in what follows I would like to consider a project with a more modest goal—namely, I would like to consider what it might mean to imagine reading and writing as less readily examinable activities. In pursuing this project, I prefer to rely on the image of "exploration" partly because of the fact that, in the wake of post-colonial criticism, the term no longer connotes only a positive sense of pure adventure and discovery, but rather summons, as well, images of contamination, including visions of crossed boundaries and of possible transgressions, both known and unknown, into forbidden territories. Thus, the questions I'm interested in pursuing at this point are these: what happens when, in place of carefully regulated and examinable interchanges between reader and text, one admits the possibility that individual acts of reading and writing are the result of chance encounters, personal initiatives, private projects? And how and why might one go about promoting not only this view of reading and writing as interrelated acts in the unruly process of exploration, but also encouraging open engagement in such acts? It goes without saying that a pedagogy that solicits students to "explore" connections between texts may itself be construed as an implicit form of examination, a kind of quest where the reader is sent off to discover the intellectual baubles planted in advance by

omniscient authors or crafty instructors. Understood in this way, “to learn is to explore” quickly reveals itself to be part of that deadly hermeneutic, “to learn is to find hidden meanings.” As I hope to illustrate in what follows, however, there is another way to understand learning as exploration, a way that can be used to undermine the sense that what lies ahead for the reader is merely an arduous exercise in uncovering what the author (or the teacher) knew all along.

### **Reading Misreadings: Chance and the Sublime in Freud, Kant, and Longinus**

I’ve always been drawn to oversights, mistakes, errors, misreadings. Plagued by forgetfulness, I’ve learned to take pleasure in looking again at what I missed the first time. Within the pedagogy of obedience, this activity is of little more than editorial interest, however: it is work to be crossed off and completed as quickly as possible. And it is precisely for this reason that “misreading” suggests itself to me as the best place to commence a discussion of what a “pedagogy of exploration” might entail. Although the drift of the preceding discussion might seem to suggest a move in a more predictable direction—to an example, say, culled from a student paper written in one of my courses—I have decided, instead, to turn to Freud’s *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* for reasons that will become apparent shortly.<sup>4</sup> Freud was, of course, interested in examinations and errors, art and perfection, as I have been throughout this essay. In *Leonardo*, Freud relies on his work with the artist’s notebooks and paintings, as well as some fragmentary biographical information, to argue that Leonardo “succeeded in sublimating the greater part of his libido into an urge for research” (30). Specifically, Leonardo’s childhood memory of being visited in his crib by a vulture who opened the artist’s mouth and struck his lips many times with its tail reveals, in Freud’s analysis, Leonardo’s strong attachment to his mother (the vulture), his repression of this love for her, and his subsequent efforts to put himself in her place, with the end result that he “has become a homosexual” (43, 55). The meticulous records Leonardo later kept of the money he spent on his pupils are seen to provide further evidence of the “psychical development” of the artist’s homosexuality. Indeed, when Leonardo’s childhood memory and the diary entries are placed alongside one another, they make it possible to decipher the meaning of Leonardo’s remembrance of the dream about the vulture: “It was through this erotic relation with my mother that I became a homosexual” (62-63). As always with Freud, little is left to chance, so that the available fragments of a life necessarily fall into place to compose a seamless narrative of the subject’s etiology.

Though Freud toys with the idea that one can only reach the sublime heights of artistic creativity through the sublimation of libidinal desires, he ultimately concludes that, within his psychoanalytic system, Leonardo is better understood as an obsessional neurotic, with a “stunted adult sexual life” that “manifested itself in ideal love for boys” (93-94). In other words, Leonardo’s sublimation of his libidinal desires brought him not to the sublime, but rather into the realm of

“constitutional inferiority,” a psychic space characterized by, among other things, “obsessional brooding,” “the avoidance of every crudely sensual activity,” and a life of abstinence that left the impression that he was an “asexual human being” (93-94). In this way, Freud’s treatment of Leonardo reveals something about systems of examination not disclosed in our earlier exploration of the subject: had everything gone according to plan, had Leonardo made “the correct decision in his choice of object” during the onset of puberty (52), he never would have had artistic and scientific achievements that Freud himself calls “sublime” (82). At the same time, Freud provides an example of a way of reading that focusses, for the moment at least, not on “the norm,” but on deviations from the norm, seeing in those deviations failures, to be sure, but also invitations to explore further.

But what does it mean, ultimately, to assess Leonardo’s work as “sublime”? While Freud is less than precise about what the term might mean, Kant’s famous definition in the *Critique of Judgment* rules out its application to objects or actions, works of art or artistic performances. For Kant, the sublime, as opposed to the beautiful, “is not to be sought in the things of nature, but only in our ideas” (88). Specifically, this occurs when the mind “finds the whole power of the imagination inadequate to its ideas” (95), a failure that “forces us, subjectively, to *think* nature itself in its totality as a presentation of something supersensible, without being able *objectively* to arrive at this presentation” (108). While experiencing this failure is painful, it is not wholly unpleasant, for the mind finds purpose and what Kant calls the “negative pleasure” of “respect and admiration” (83) in the fact that “every standard of sensibility [is] inadequate to the ideas of understanding” (97). Within Kant’s well ordered system, then, one could not properly speak of sublime achievements, unless one meant achievements that, when contemplated, generated an experience of both the mind’s and the imagination’s inability to present an image adequate to the achievement.

Freud, himself, appears to have had just such an experience when he tried to conclude Leonardo’s psychic history. In the final chapter of *Leonardo*, Freud starts out both establishing and defending the integrity of psychoanalysis as an independent scientific field, arguing that by working with the known circumstances of a subject’s life and the subject’s recorded responses, one can “disclose the original motive forces of his mind, as well as their later transformations and developments” (97). If any problems arise in the analysis, it is not the fault of the method, but must rather be understood to have been produced by “the uncertainty and fragmentary nature of the material” available for study (97). Midway through this argument, though, Freud is forced to concede that the very application of his psychoanalytic method creates the appearance of inevitability where chance was actually at play all along: Leonardo’s response to his illegitimate birth and his attachment to his mother need not have occurred in the ways that they did. Indeed, Freud admits, “in someone else [the repressive response] might perhaps not have taken place or might have assumed much less extensive proportions” (98). By acknowledging this—perhaps lamentable—

state of affairs, where the events of one's life only assume an order when looked at through the lens of psychoanalysis, Freud is brought, it seems, to the verge of the sublime: we must admit, he says, "that in fact everything to do with our life is chance, from our origin out of the meeting of spermatozoon and ovum onwards—chance which nevertheless has a share in the law and necessity of nature, and which merely lacks any connection with our wishes and illusions" (100). Although Freud is incapable of producing an image that can account for the "countless causes" at work in nature, a fact that would appear to undermine the argument for psychoanalysis' status as a science, this same fact seems to give him pleasure. Thus, when he reflects on the role chance plays in our lives, he is forced to conclude that "we all still show too little *respect* for Nature," invoking the very kind of negative pleasure Kant asserts is called for in response to apprehending the sublime (100; emphasis added).

If Freud is, indeed, transported to the sublime as a result of contemplating the ultimate inability of his system to account for the totality of human development, where does that leave us? That is, if it is true that "*everything* to do with our life is chance," then the possibility of developing a meaningful system for evaluating, measuring, or interpreting acts of reading and writing, on the one hand, or psychic events, on the other, seems lost. And, of course, Freud's *Leonardo* dramatically illustrates the consequences of forgetting for a moment that chance constantly threatens to bring entire interpretive enterprises crashing to the ground. Despite Freud's closing observations about the role chance plays in one's life, he stands by his results, where "[i]t seems at any rate as if only a man who had had Leonardo's childhood experiences could have painted the Mona Lisa and the St. Anne . . . , as if the key to all [Leonardo's] achievements and misfortunes lay hidden in the childhood phantasm of the vulture" (90). So much depends, it seems, on the metaphoric and allusive powers of that vulture: it is "the key" that unlocks the mysteries of Leonardo's life and the source of his creative powers. It is the self-sufficient bird that opens its vagina mid-flight to be impregnated by the wind (41); it represents "the mother" in Egyptian hieroglyphics (39); and its head rests atop the Egyptian Mother Goddess *Mut* whose name so closely resembles the German word for "mother" that Freud is compelled to ask if this could "be merely a coincidence?" (39).

And yet, as it turns out, it isn't even a coincidence, since that "vulture" is no vulture at all, but a kite, and all the remarkable connections between Leonardo and his mother show themselves to be nothing but a phantasm of Freud's system. The problem, it seems, is that Freud relied on a version of Leonardo's work that mistranslated the key word in Leonardo's childhood memory. Although Freud announces in *Leonardo* that his goal is "to translate the phantasy from its own special language into words that are generally understood" (36) and although he "translates" the phantasy a number of times,<sup>5</sup> he seems to place the actual act of translating the phantasy itself from Italian into German as something outside the limits of the psychoanalyst's concern. While this self-imposed limit makes it possible for Freud to pursue the vulture to Egypt,

discovering these cultural artifacts that simultaneously produce and reinforce his explanation of the enabling conditions that led Leonardo to paint the Mona Lisa, his “translations” no longer hold when this limit is challenged and the “mistranslation” is discovered.<sup>6</sup> In light of such a discovery, it seems safe to say that Freud has failed dramatically in *Leonardo*.

Or is it? Could it be that Freud’s failures are, in fact, not entirely his own, but also partly his readers’? While it may seem well warranted to assess Freud’s efforts in *Leonardo* to limit the intrusion of a chance error into the domain of language a “failure,” it is possible to argue that this very failure makes his work sublime in a way not discussed in the *Critique of Judgment*. Longinus offers just such an alternate definition in his treatise, *On the Sublime*. Responding to Caecilius’ assertion that Lysias was altogether superior to Plato because he made fewer faults in his speeches, Longinus asserts: “For my part, I am well aware that lofty genius is far removed from flawlessness; for invariably accuracy incurs the risk of pettiness, and in the sublime, as in great fortunes, *there must be something which is overlooked*” (99; emphasis added). Obviously, errors alone don’t constitute sublime writing for Longinus. His point, rather, is that error-free writing is more often the product of petty rather than sublime aspirations. With this in mind, it becomes possible to argue that the magnitude of Freud’s error is perhaps evidence of the sublime quality of his writing: only by trying to accomplish a project so grand as accounting for the formation of the self and the source of artistic achievement could he have overlooked something so fundamental to his argument as the correct translation of the central term in his analysis.

Whatever the merits of such an understanding of the sublime, Longinus’s definition does serve to explain the odd conclusion to *Leonardo*, where Freud seems to undermine the scientific status of psychoanalysis with each passing sentence. Longinus argues that the effect of sublime speech “is not persuasion but transport” (80), and that this “genuine passion,” in the right place, “bursts out in a wild gust of mad enthusiasm and as it were fills the speaker’s words with frenzy” (84). What Roberts translates here as “transport” is the Greek word *ekstasis* which has as its first meaning a displacement, and thus, by extension, entrancement and astonishment (Liddell and Scott 244). To read *Leonardo* in this way is to credit the writing with producing exactly the opposite effect one would expect from a case study of an artist whose “powerful instinctual passions . . . express[ed] themselves in so remarkably subdued a manner” (97). Freud’s aim is not to provide a rational argument that persuades the reader of the reasonableness of the self-imposed limits of psychoanalysis but, rather, to transport the reader, through his ecstatic prose, to accept, perhaps even to join in, the activities of psychoanalytic interpretation. And, in this regard at least, however much one might wish for another outcome, it seems safe to say that the ecstatic effect of Freud’s prose has been unparalleled in modern times.

To put Freud aside for the moment, though, it is no doubt curious that Kant’s definition of the sublime involves a conflict between reason and the imagination,

while Longinus' definition elevates madness to the highest form of expression. This definitional tension recalls the central debate in the *Phaedrus* over the effects of love. Longinus, himself, is drawn to this dialogue when he discusses what Plato has to teach us about sublime writing:

[Plato] shows us, if only we were willing to pay him heed, that another way . . . leads to the sublime. . . . It is the imitation and emulation of previous great poets and writers. . . . Was Herodotus alone a devoted imitator of Homer? No, Stesichorus even before his time, and Archilochus, and above all Plato, who from the great Homeric source drew to himself innumerable tributary streams. (89)

Here, Longinus not only makes the claim that Plato's ultimate source of inspiration was literary rather than philosophical, he also maintains that the Homeric influences on Plato's work are "innumerable," uncountable, unmeasurable. With so many doors leading from Plato's dialogues to Homer's poems, how does one know which one to go through? While Longinus would have us believe that Stesichorus gained access to the sublime by imitating Homer, in the *Phaedrus* Socrates maintains that Stesichorus was actually rewarded with blindness for his mimetic act (490). Indeed, as Socrates tells the story, it was only when Stesichorus stopped imitating Homer and wrote a recantation of his poem about Helen that the Gods returned to him his ability to see.

Does the sublime lead to reason or madness? Does it produce clarity of vision or blindness? Does it involve imitation or invention? If we return again to the *Phaedrus*, we see that after Socrates offers his reading of Stesichorus' plight and repeats word for word the poet's recantation, he then produces what Longinus might well have thought of as sublime speech: a speech "flashing forth at the right moment scatter[ing] everything before it like a thunderbolt" (Longinus 80), a speech less concerned with persuasion than transport, a speech celebrating a certain kind of madness over reason, a speech, finally, that Socrates himself attributes to Stesichorus. Socrates imitates Stesichorus imitating Homer. A sublime chain. There are, of course, other alternatives, other explanations, other explorations for what is going on in this dialogue. It would be possible to maintain, along with reader-response theorists, that in this case it is not the text at all which is sublime, but the reading process itself, where answers shimmer evanescently, and the discussion of ideas, great and small, roils on, not towards a conclusion but rather towards periods of suspension, reflection, exhaustion, cessation.

### The Hairpin Turn

I turned to this bundle of concerns about chance and the sublime in order to pursue a way of reading and writing not so readily amenable to examination—an alternative to the notion that "to learn is to obey," an approach that explores and exploits ambiguity rather than seeking to conceal and contain it. The journey



through, to continue the metaphor, has lead me far from whatever might be called my field of expertise, and I've no doubt muddled some of the finer points in making my way between the texts. In spite of or perhaps because of this fact, this process has suggested to me that to learn is, perhaps, to sublime, if "to sublime" may be made to mean "to displace one's expectations." Thus, to the long list of viable answers I've discussed in this essay to the question, "What does it mean to learn?" I would like to add, "to learn is to displace, both oneself and the object of study." This, surely, is what it means to "explore." And yet, at the same time, I have seen as well that to learn is also to displace the sublime, to constantly seek to control and contain the mad enthusiasm of the text, trading transport for persuasion in hopes of regulating chance. Exploration inevitably gives way to discovery, as chance gives way to determination. Oscillating between these two treatments of the sublime, it is clear that there would be nothing left to say if this containment could ever be successfully completed.

Such exploratory opportunities exist in all texts, of course. They are as present in Bennett's *Index* as they are in the works by Freud, Kant, Longinus, and Plato. In order to invite students to pass through these "intertextual" doorways and to embark on such projects of exploration, where they are encouraged to engage with language as a realm of possible meanings and to see reading and writing as inextricably related acts of discovery, it is necessary that one develop a pedagogical practice that values unruly acts of reading and writing and to solicit responses that are, at times, ponderous and confused. This may seem counter-intuitive: after all, it's one thing to endorse exploration; it's quite another to promote the production of writing that is circuitous, fanciful, or lost and to reward essays that go "off topic," make odd or unexpected juxtapositions, and establish connections on the tightest of hairpin turns. And yet, if writing is understood as a dialogical act, where the writer simultaneously makes and reports meaning, drawing on internal resources and responding to external pressures, then the educational process and its systems of examination might serve a more heuristic purpose if they assisted students in exploring a range of hermeneutic processes, rather than having students focus exclusively on issues of style, summary, and personal response. This means, I believe, acknowledging that the writing process is not simply the means by which a writer's prose is moved to a point of greater and greater clarity—but that it can also be a recursive system whereby the developing ideas in an unfolding text become increasingly complex, contingent, muddled, stalled, even abandoned.

When students are presented with the idea that successful mastery of the writing process produces a smooth voyage to clarity, they come to understand that anything that stands in the way of clarity must be expunged: ambiguity, obscure references, contradictions, paradoxes, tangential thoughts—the fundamental material, one might say, of lived experience and of one's mental life. "Making one's point" then becomes the highest value. The essays I read at ETS may be construed as a consequence of such a pedagogy: the students, fearful of being wrong or unclear, stuck as close to the text as possible (e.g., "Didion doesn't

like this wind"). While it's easy enough to go on and fault (or assess) writing of this kind on the basis of its organization or diction—to engage, in other words, in the stock in trade of teacher commentary—the real problem, I would maintain, is that such writing is not messy enough. The drive to be clear evolves into a concern with being safe and the safest place to be is to reiterate the author's or the teacher's position with admiration, respect, civility.

While such writing has its place (indeed, I tend to think that it has nothing else but its place), the alternative I've argued for here is to pursue literary explorations as one way of releasing the student writer from the enervating experience of the solitary encounter with the solitary text, where all the work that remains is to re-speak the author's words. What this means in practice is providing students with the opportunity to read and write about something other than a single text in isolation and to focus, instead, on getting students to establish relationships between texts—juxtaposing terms and ideas, pursuing connections, exploring hunches, making a run for the sublime. In establishing “dialogues” among different texts in this way, students find that they must constantly negotiate between the desire to take the discussion anywhere they please and the opposing desire to follow the leads suggested by or inferred from the texts. As they work between these two poles of freedom and regulation, open exploration and directed travel, they often produce questions they can't answer, offer hypotheses they can't support, and make arguments that don't hold together. There is an immense value to such writing: it is the very stuff of preliminary research, the bone and marrow of intellectual life. As Socrates says at the conclusion of the *Phaedrus*, “Every great art must be supplemented by leisurely discussion, by stargazing, if you will, about the nature of things” (60). Developing a pedagogical practice that allows such “stargazing” to occur, where students can explore different hermeneutic practices as they speculate on questions as vast as “the nature of things,” is, I believe, a project of central importance to teachers of literature and composition. It is also, needless to say, a project whose very success will always be necessarily difficult to assess.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It should be clear that my critique of the system is not aimed at the people who participate in it: indeed, during the six days I spent in San Antonio as a member of this grading marathon in June 1994, I found my fellow assessors and the Table Leaders to be a remarkably kind and generous lot. Everyone I spoke with took the work seriously and labored to keep each others' spirits up, even as the task of grading over forty thousand essays responding to the same question threatened to rob all of us of our sanity.

<sup>2</sup> It was just such a review of the output sheets that revealed that our room as a whole was not giving out enough scores at the top end of the scale. Consequently, appropriate steps were taken to remind us of what an excellent response to our question looked like. The hope, apparently, was that the graders would recognize that their own standards were unreasonably elevated and begin to distribute more scores at the high end of the spectrum.

<sup>3</sup> The rewards for knowing this system are not simply pedagogical and cultural, however. The examination system itself actually produces a whole side industry of test-taking experts: two of the other graders at my table “moonlighted” back in their home states as consultants to local high schools, providing teacher-training workshops on how to maximize student performance on the exam.

<sup>4</sup> I didn’t just come across Freud’s *Leonardo* while in the midst of these thoughts about the tension between systems of examination and chance. Rather, it was reading Derrida’s essay, “My Chances/*Mes Chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies” that first suggested to me the possible relevance of Freud’s work on Leonardo to my argument.

<sup>5</sup> Freud recommends, for instance, that the phantasy might be “translated: ‘My mother pressed innumerable passionate kisses on my mouth’” (*Leonardo* 64).

<sup>6</sup> Freud’s own silence on the broader subject of mistranslations is evident in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Although he provides many examples of slips of the pen and problems with foreign words, he has nothing to say about a reader who, though devoted to the study of parapraxis in himself and in others, is blind to the possibility of parapraxis occurring in a text he is reading.

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### Winterowd Award Winners Announced

The annual W. Ross Winterowd Award for the most outstanding book on composition theory published in 1994 was awarded to Jasper Neel for *Aristotle's Voice: Rhetoric, Theory, and Writing in America*.

The 1993 W. Ross Winterowd Award was awarded to Kurt Spellmeyer for *Common Gound: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition*. Honorable mention was shared by C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon for *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy* and Valerie M. Balester for *Cultural Divide: A Study of African-American College-Level Writers*.

This annual award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd. The selection committee was chaired by Irene Ward. Professor Winterowd presented the 1994 awards during the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition meeting at the CCCC Convention in Washington, D.C.

Send nominations for the 1995 W. Ross Winterowd Award to Thomas Kent, editor; *JAC*; Department of English; Iowa State University; Ames, IA 50011.