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Diverse Journeys: Free-Writing, John Keats, and the Teaching of Poetry

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Memory should not be called knowledge—Many have original Minds who do not think it—they are led away by Custom—Now it appears to me that almost any Man may like the Spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel...full of Symbols for his spiritual eye.

John Keats to J. H. Reynolds, February 19 1818.¹

I want to report an act of piracy. In my undergraduate literature courses, more so, I think, than in teaching introductory composition, I had been beset by too many safe, dull papers, generically derivative if not actually plagiarized. My response — more class-time spent introducing the assignment, more hints about topic-development on the assignment sheets —helped some students but was ineffectual with many. Since some of the problem is student attitude and a lack of confidence about literary study, I spent more time, especially near the beginning of my sophomore survey, discussing how and why one might read or write about older literature. This also seemed to help some students. All these were, I suppose, standard enough tactics, remedial rather than radical, reflecting my generally conservative bias on questions of undergraduate writing and study.

Yet the device that has worked best is a straightforward piracy from a more anti-traditionalist pedagogy, one I find theoretically unsympathetic; it is an adaptation to the literature classroom of individual, in-class free-writing.² It seems worthwhile reporting the exercise in some detail, as it carries implications, not just about improving literature papers, but also about developing students' consciousness of the reading act itself. Teasing out some of these implications has led me to reread and reconsider one of the great examples of explorative writing — John Keats's letters. Often, our understanding of the rhetoric of the past draws too heavily on theoretical manuals, and neglects the very instructive examples of individual practice. My hunch is that most of us have stuck with fairly traditional assignments for our literature courses — essentially, formal papers, aiming to elicit well-articulated argument and a considered, public judgment. Such assignments still seem to me to embody wholly admirable aims, but in literature classes, as

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has long been recognised in composition, the teaching problem is how to get students engaged in their own thinking, so that they have arguments to articulate and judgments to consider. We can use writing, not only for formal assignments, but much ~~more~~ more directly and informally, during our literature class-periods, and in doing so, we can deepen our students' literary responses and improve their more formal out-of-class written work.

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The exercise I describe was developed for a conventional sophomore literary-historical survey course, Survey of British Literature II (1800- the present day). The format I have used is a short period of timed and cued free-writing, followed by class discussion both of the particular text and of the reading experience. At intervals in the opening weeks of the semester, I devoted a class-period to the study of one poem or prose-passage, and I began by getting each student to write, fast and without any attention to "editorial" correctness, his responses to a named word, image, or rhythm pattern from the text. The students did not previously know on which poem or passage we should be working, though they knew from the course-outline which author and group of poems had been assigned that week. Each student keeps on writing, expanding, developing and evolving his thoughts about the given "cue" until told to stop (usually 2-3 minutes). Then a fresh cue is given, and the process repeated.

In the class on Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," for instance, I began by asking students to write in response to the Frenchness of the title; moved on to ask for responses to the words "knight" (line 1), "faery" (line 14), and "wild" (line 16); reactions to the food in lines 25-26, and the line "she lulled me asleep" (line 33); and concluded by asking for comments on the rhythm of the line "And no birds sing" (lines 4, 48).

It is very important that students keep writing continuously during each cue-period, for only so can they move from their consciously "expected" answers to surface some of the complexity of their response. Initially, they all hope to put down the "right" answers, and they play safe. Only their second, third or fourth ideas in the chain are likely to become interesting. In the Keats example, many students start with the "proper" responses to "faery" as "beautiful" or "magical" and only thereafter go on to wonder if the word also suggests to them the unreal or the childish. The Frenchness of the title may safely be identified as "romantic" or "foreign" or, by the better read, as medieval or Gothick, but it is more risky to assert its cute preciosity ~~to~~ the arrogance with which it oppresses the monolingual reader. With "she lulled me to sleep," first responses are often about kindness or gentleness, and only

or

in the prolongation of the response do students start writing about mothers (then what is the knight doing kissing her wild, wild eyes?), or about nurses quieting their children, or about deceivers offering false security. As Macrorie and Elbow argue for composition, so also in the literature class, the sheer momentum of relatively unmonitored (?uncensored) writing breaks up the safe blandness of student interpretation.

Composition teachers already know some of the practical class-room advantages to the free-writing exercise. Above all, it ensures that every student is working at full stretch. One central problem in teaching a literature course is to get a whole classroom full of very diverse students continuously engaged in the act of reading. Under straitened budgets, literature classes are normally significantly larger than those in composition (even the ADE guidelines suggest 35-student literature sections, as against 20 in composition). It is genuinely difficult to keep the whole number actively involved with the literature, rather than passively taking notes about it. Open discussion, clearly-focussed practical criticism sessions, structured debate, can all help, but ~~most~~ involve only a minority of students in any one phase of the class-period. One advantage of using in-class writing assignments, on whatever model, is that during that time-period every student must tackle the literature for himself. By comparison with traditional, structured-question, literature comprehension exercises, cued and timed free-writing ensures that all students, whether quick or slow, are engaged for the same number of minutes; no one can loll in the back row and claim to be finished. The calling of the cues, like the calling of steps in country-dancing, evokes both breathlessly communal good-will and some healthy individual anxiety, and the very pressure of the activity precludes more than momentary alienation. The exercise need not, indeed should not, take up more than a small part of the class-period: I find that 4-6 cues, needing a total of 10-15 minutes of class-time, are plenty, and a discussion might usefully be started with only one or two significant clues.

Since all students have been writing, all of the class now have in front of them the raw and inchoate material for very lively, but directable, discussion. Most of the benefits of a free-writing period, it seems to me, are lost if the student does not get a reason for reflecting on what he has produced; indeed, free-writing without provision for a reflective or pattern-seeking stage is close to mere busywork. In the literature class, I ask particular students what they have written, encouraging counter-statements or support from others, and poll the class intermittently on specific responses. Since the exercise calls for reaction, not interpretation, no idea is wrong at this stage, though obviously

some turn out to be more generally interesting than others. All sorts of issues come out in such discussion — the complexity of literary language and literary response; the interrelation of personal, public or generic, and historical meanings; the chain- (or blinker-) effect in reading, where one powerful emotional trigger stimulates yet also limits the reader's ideas about later words or images; the problem of subjectivism vs. objectivism in interpretation; and the relative or absolute indeterminacy of literary meanings. These "theoretical" questions cannot simply be postponed for a class in literary theory or left to the experts at Yale and Johns Hopkins — the questions are very real and disturbing to even average students. Our silence on such questions is a major cause of undergraduate scepticism and alienation from serious literary study, for it seems frivolous to study something so apparently indeterminate. As Keats wrote, to his friend Bailey, "I am sometimes so very sceptical as to think Poetry itself a mere Jack a lantern to amuse whoever may chance to be struck with its brilliance."³ In the course of free-writing and discussion, students learn a great deal about their own emotions, and the exercise can generate very interesting debate, not just about the individual text, but about the very ideas of "reading" and "literature."⁴ Does the faery woman in "La Belle Dame" seem unreal? What would unreal mean, in a poem? Is the food a sexual image, or a regression to childishness, or are we, even as adults, simply moved by the idea of gorging ourselves? Is being a knight, even in fantasy, a silly game for a late twentieth-century student or an early nineteenth-century ex-surgeon's apprentice? Is the poem "about" the loss of love, or "about" sexual guilt, or is it instead (or "also") about the seductions and betrayals of the poetic imagination?⁵ Do we think about the poem better, or merely differently, when we have also read the ballad of Thomas the Rhymer and his meeting with the Elf Queen under the Eildon tree?⁶ Is it fair to remember last week's Wordsworth poem, and its "wildly clad" girl-child, when reading Keats's "wild, wild eyes," and does it make a difference that we know Keats had been reading the Wordsworth? What status does Robert Gittings's biographical interpretation have, which makes the poem Keats's response to discovering the fraudulence of some love-letters an impostor had sent to his brother Tom, now dying? How many rival "meanings" for the poem can a reader have in his head while reading? Are, perhaps, all such solutions of the poem evasions of its power, with its recurrent attraction really stemming from a single, repressed psychological pattern, common to Keats and many readers, echoing infant pain at separation from the mother or nurse? Is the poem the same poem for male and female readers, for adolescent and middle-aged readers, for pre- and post-Freudian readers? Are all "interpretations" equally valid? Are all uses of a poem equally respectable? Any college teacher knows where he stands on such questions, but students need to feel the reality of them for themselves, if

the act of interpretation is to become deliberate, personal choice, rather than mere floundering imitation.

As it happens, appropriately enough, John Keats himself discussed exactly these issues in a letter to J. H. Reynolds, in February 1818. Keats had begun his letter by describing an ideal, brooding, undirected, responsiveness to literature, revelling in the openness and plurality of literary association:

I have an idea that a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner — let him on any certain day read a certain Page of full Poesy or distilled Prose and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect from it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it ... When Man has arrived at a certain ripeness in intellect any one grand and spiritual passage serves him as a starting post towards all “the two-and thirty Pallaces.” How happy is such a “voyage of conception,” what delicious diligent Indolence!⁸

There follows the passage I used as epigraph, about the latent originality of “almost any Man,” who “may like the Spider spin ... his own airy Citadel” and “weave a tapestry empyrean” from his literary responses. Keats does not, however, long rest content with such an anarchic reader-response theory, for he proceeds:

the Minds of Mortals are so different and bent on such diverse Journeys that it may at first appear impossible for any common taste and fellowship to exist between two or three under these suppositions — It is however quite the contrary — Minds would leave each other in contrary directions, traverse each other in Numberless points, and all last greet each other at the Journeys end —⁹

Some might, of course, dismiss this as claptrap Platonism, at odds with the original thought that precedes it; I would have thought that such an idea as Keats's, of the convergence of understandings, was a highly desirable goal for literary interpretation. But what is of particular significance for teachers is Keats's continual harping on the time-element in the interpretative process. Reading, wandering, musing, voyaging, spinning, journeying, traversing — all are more activities than actions, and a diversity of journeyings, leading to two-and-thirty Palaces, comes before any monistic Journey's End. There are strong parallels between Keats's treatment of the reading process in this letter, and the picture he gives elsewhere of developing thought as a series of chambers, leading from the first “infant or thoughtless Chamber,” through the Chamber of Maiden-Thought where “we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight,” on to the real emotional and intellectual difficulties of pluralism as “on all sides ... many doors are set open — but all dark — all leading to dark passages,” and then,

following the lead of “explorative” Genius, finding a third Chamber of Life “stored with the wine of love — and the Bread of Friendship.”¹⁰ In Keats's description, both the reading process and general intellectual development involve discrete stages of delight, divergence, apparently perverse continuance, horror at the consequences, and a quasi-religious hope that diversity will be followed by an ultimate communion. Even if we wish to assert and to teach a literary-historical, objectivist, or socially-derived intersubjectivist, critical position, we can only teach it effectively by confronting as honestly as we can the uncertainties and divergences of the reading experience. As Keats wrote in another connection, “axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses: We read fine — things but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same step as the Author.”¹¹

One of the benefits of the cued free-writing exercise is that it makes students confront head-on the divergence of individual literary response. Even if, in contributing to discussion or in drawing on their free-writing for more formal papers, many students silently censor out their more eccentric reactions, during the class they all have the evidence of their own individuality on the page in front of them. Two points are worth stressing with undergraduates: first, the normality of such divergence, especially in pre-critical or unstructured reading situations, and, second, the different reasons a reader might have, on different occasions, for wanting to encourage or tolerate or control or inhibit the eccentricity of his response. Keats himself wrote, about “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” and not more than half-ironically, that “we must temper the Imagination as the Critics say with Judgment.”¹² If the teacher's own interests include reading theory (or if reading theory is used in the department's introductory English courses), he might draw on the concept of extrinsic reading *schemata* to explain how all readers, even with non-literary texts, make patterns of coherence out of the centrifugality of language.¹³ A linguist would presumably stress the role of syntax in limiting or focussing response to lexical items. Those with a New Critical background will obviously emphasize the role of intrinsic patterns and contrasts in helping the reader choose among his responses to individual words and images. Those whose bent is primarily biographical or literary-historical will find plenty of opportunity for discussing the kinds of historical evidence, about language and ideas, that make one select particular primary significances for the individual words of a poem. Those with an interest in modern literary theory might want to refer, not only to the obviously-relevant subjectivist position, encouraged in pedagogy by David Bleich and supported by theorists of psychological response, but also to E. D. Hirsch's

complementary concept of "generic determinacy," and the limits of valid interpretation.¹⁴ From all these different perspectives there seems to be agreement that there is a "stage" of control on free-floating associationism in all good reading.

It is important, however, not to be chillingly negative, and the first free-writing exercise, at least, should be used primarily to get the students actively engaged in the generation of ideas; the theoretical or control questions can be raised after a second or subsequent exercise, by getting students to read over their responses before the discussion, to circle any that seem to them illegitimate, and then to discuss the reasons for such self-disownment. Much the most common reason for students to mistrust their first responses is fear, rather than mature wisdom or some sudden access of more exact factual information. There is a valuable positive lesson in this, that most students are too willing to censor their pre-critical responses, and therefore simplify even the text they know, while an honest following-up of their odder responses can often lead them to a more rounded and truly critical understanding.

Why does the free-writing exercise work? Essentially, I think, for the same reasons that a step-by-step, every-stage-on-paper, experience of "the" writing process works for many writing classes — not because it drills students in a perfect model-sequence to be used in all subsequent reading or writing tasks, but because, as a way of teaching, it slows up, differentiates, develops, and so increases consciousness of, individual elements within a complex mental activity. It uses writing to exteriorize and so to examine a mental process usually seen and discussed only in its results. Like most textbook treatments of the writing process, the free-writing-and-discussion format for studying literature arouses one's suspicion because it is highly artificial; its very systematizing alters what it is examining, and it renders sequential what is actually a continuing debate between levels of consciousness, and between first and subsequent responses. There are in ordinary reading general and structuring ideas of the whole text influencing our responses almost from our first sight of the page, well before we have got into, let alone finished, the sequence of individual words. Just as in process-centred writing classes, so also in using this similar approach to teach literature, the artificiality of the pedagogic technique needs to be discussed with students if they are to be able to generalize from it to their other and later reading.

But, in spite of these dangers of crude hypostatization of mere pedagogic labels, as in the writing course, one can also assert in good faith the

experiential reality of the process so artificially exteriorized. The first, private, individually-structured, free-writing stage, of multiple reactions to individual clues, where strong or "improper" responses to one cue colour or limit conscious responses to the next, is an exteriorization of something that happens, consciously or not, in all reading, and which accounts for much of our feeling about a text. What the exercise downplays is the role of the reading occasion, and of established reading patterns, in structuring even those first responses, just as occasion and given forms or genres, not just pure reason or the classical topics, function in rhetorical invention. The second, public, discussion or debate situation obviously corresponds to a public consciousness or monitoring element within the reading process; such monitoring may be immediate (as when syntactic parallelism with the previous phrase makes one hesitate over "fever dew," before categorizing "dew" as the noun and "fever" as the adjective), and it may also be more distantly recursive (as when, after three or four stanzas of reading the poem as psychological document, one recalls "it's really a conventional literary ballad"). There are definite advantages in using discussion for this monitoring stage — the stage involves an awareness of multiple value- and knowledge-systems beyond the self, and discussion socializes students to a more abstract level of critical debate. It is also valuable, however, for students to learn to do such monitoring and patterning of their responses for themselves, and if one is encouraging students to build on the exercises in the preparation of their formal essays, some practice on paper is helpful. What the discussion or monitoring stage of this model omits, because it takes place in the single situation of classroom study, is the variability of the monitor — not just the differences between conscious reading in different historical periods or different national cultures, but the variations in monitoring style for the individual reader, on different reading occasions and when reading for different purposes.¹⁵ Much of good reading, after all, lies in finding the appropriate relation between irresponsible play with possibilities and responsibly hard-nosed monism, appropriate, that is, for that particular reading occasion; one of the difficulties in teaching literature is that the occasion encourages a premature and unearned singleness of interpretation in the class-lecture (how else can the course be made coherent? why else employ the professor to teach?), and this characteristic of the classroom provides a rather unhelpful model for students in their writing situation, for it implies safe unadventurousness rather than explorative development.

The issues raised, then, by this innocent piracy of a single composition exercise seem to me both important and interesting. It would be possible to use the cued free-writing exercise simply as an occasional variation or

lightener in a standard literary-survey course (as I had originally intended to do). Even if it is used only once or twice in the semester, it offers the opportunity to get students engaged in the interpretative act and helps them develop more realistic ideas about the relation of their pre-critical responses to considered retrospective interpretation. If, however, the more formal essays of the course ask for arguments built on close critical commentary about a few poems or passages, then the free-writing exercise functions also as an introduction to those formal assignments, on the lines of the pre-writing work often done in class in composition courses. Free-writing exercises are not usually designed to be "taken in," for grading, lest spontaneity be threatened; the professor gets a lot of feedback about the writing from the ensuing discussion. However, on one early exercise (partly because I wanted to get very clear what was going on), I invited volunteers to let me see their notes, and a large proportion did so. I was able to put encouraging remarks by interesting or ambitious responses and to advise those who had ideas, but whose "natural" style was very side of standard edited English, how to avoid false inhibitions in writing the formal paper by keeping separate the drafting and editing stages, while warning them about the need for editorial care at the proper time. If the prospect of leaving any, even informal, student writing with errors unmarked still worries conservative teachers, we have the surely not negligible example of Keats himself, in the letters — one of the great examples of prose that is intense, informed and explorative, but loose in spelling, oddly punctuated and capitalized, and ostentatiously unpremeditated in structure:

you see how I have run away from [the topics of] Wordsworth, and Milton; and shall still run away from what was in my head, to observe, that some kinds of letters are good squares others handsome ovals, and others some orbicular, others spheroid...alas for me, it being an impossibility in grain for my ink to stain otherwise: If I scribble long letters I must play my vagaries ... I must play my draughts as I please.¹⁶

The free-writing exercise, then, is not a substitute for formal literary-critical papers, nor need it imply an anarchically-subjectivist literary-theoretical position; it is simply a technique by which students can surface, and so face the complexity of, their responses. It allows sophomore or upper-level literature teachers to build on and reinforce the teaching of the introductory composition courses, by stressing once again the differences between exploratory and "finished" writing. Not all students will learn these lessons or take to the approach, and, indeed, it will not work well with all kinds of literary text; my guess at this point is that it works better with Romantic and later literature, while a more structured rhetorical or other

interpretative approach works better with earlier literature. Many of my students, however, after such informal, in-class, writing experience, produced formal papers with more individual content and learnt to read poems much more interestingly.

NOTES

¹Letters of John Keats, ed. Robert Gittings (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 66; cited below as *Letters*.

²Cf. Ken Macgregor, *Telling Writing*, 2nd ed. (Rochelle Park, N. J.: Hayden, 1976); Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

³March 13 1818, in *Letters*, p. 73.

⁴The impact of post-New Critical literary theory, especially reader-response theory, in practical literature teaching is arousing considerable debate; see, e.g., Lois Roney, "Teaching Poetry: the Range of Valid Interpretation and its Limits," *Journal of English Teaching Techniques*, 11 (1981), 24-41; *the articles by John Clifford, Karen Lewis-Dale, and Ellen Strenski, in Teaching English in the Two-year College*, 6 (Winter 1980), 95-100, 117-120, 121-127; and David Bleich, "The Identity of Pedagogy and Research in the Study of Response to Literature," *College English*, 42 (December 1980), 350-366.

⁵Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948), p. 378.

⁶Francis James Child, ed., *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (orig. 1882-1898; repr. New York: Dover, 1965), I, 317-329.

⁷Robert Gittings, *John Keats, the Living Year* (London: Heineman, 1954; repr. 1968), pp. 113-123.

⁸*Letters*, P. 65; Gittings links the "two-and-thirty Pallaces" to Bhuddist doctrine.

⁹*ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁰Keats to J. H. Reynolds, May 3 1818, in *Letters*, pp. 95-96.

¹¹*ibid.*, p. 93

¹²Keats to J. H. Reynolds, April 21 1818, in *Letters*, p. 244.

¹³These ideas have been applied to composition by George L. Dillon, *Constructing Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), esp. ch. 3, and are clearly relevant to literary theory also. Cf. Richard Beach, "Studying the Relationship between Prior Knowledge and Response to Literature," *English Journal*, 69 (December 1980), 93-96.

¹⁴David Bleich, *Readings and Feelings, an Introduction to Subjective Criticism* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975); E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New

Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), usefully analyzes Hirsch's relation to other modern critics.

¹⁵Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), argues for a broad distinction between "aesthetic" and "efferent" reading, but in practice usefully distinguishes a great variety of reading purposes and attitudes.

¹⁶Letters, pp. 93-94.

"Wordsworth, The Pawnbroker, and the Teaching of Memory"

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A specter is haunting American higher education; it is the specter of the core curriculum. In journals such as *Change* and the *Journal of General Education* and books, Arthur Levine's *Handbook on Undergraduate Curriculum*, articles with titles of "A Hard New Look at the Old Core Curriculum", "Reconstructing General Education", and "Liberal Education for Careers in Business"¹ offer rationales for the establishment of a set of required courses. Some attention is given to the place of science in the core,² but the focus is upon the humanities as a necessary part of an undergraduate education. The argument for the core is very similar to Matthew Arnold's reply to T. H. Huxley in "Literature and Science":

We shall all have to acquaint ourselves with the great results reached by modern science and to give ourselves as much training in its disciplines as we can conveniently carry, yet the majority of men will always require humane letters; and so much the more, as they have the more and the greater results of science to relate to the need in man for conduct and to the need in him for beauty.³

Arnold's 19th century views find approving audiences today as the core curriculum thesis is advanced. The response of humanities faculties to the student rejection of their disciplines has been to require the reading of certain classical works. English departments create a course of "great books" and present the study of them as fulfilling the "need for conduct and beauty in men". Brooklyn College has recently (Fall, 1981) developed a core curriculum, and the English offering is a familiar list of Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Blake, Dickens, etc. The goal of these courses is the development of an appreciation of the great thoughts and sublime creations.

Now, a cynic might remark that the real motive behind the core curriculum juggernaut is the production of f.t.e.'s for ailing departments. Even if that were true, my concern is that the core curriculum will not solve enrollment problems and will not develop in students a felt need for the humanities. The danger lies in the required aspect of the core. Students can be forced (and probably should be so ordered) to take basic courses in composition,