

**LIVING RHETORIC  
AND COMPOSITION**

*Stories of the Discipline*

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1999

LAWRENCE ERILBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS  
Mahwah, New Jersey  
London

## Looking at Writing; Writing What I See

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In Burma in the holy city of Pagan, a large Buddha sits in the Manuha temple, a building scarcely larger than the Buddha himself. The Buddha cannot stir without bumping into a wall, cannot even shake his head without being reminded of his containment. When you walk into the chamber you see only what is immediately in front of you—mostly Buddha's throne, or Buddha's knees. You cannot gain any view of the whole. There is no room to walk around. To see another aspect of the god, you have to exit and enter through another door. Only one person can comfortably occupy each entrance. Two people crowd each other and spoil the contemplation of the god.

Although there are larger Buddhas and smaller shrines elsewhere in that city of temples, one is left with a sense of the overwhelming immensity of this particular Buddha, a Buddha too large to perceive as a whole, and of the smallness of the space the Buddha is confined within. King Manuha built this temple in 1059 C.E. while imprisoned by King Anawrahta. It is said to have been built as an act of defiance and complaint under the guise of piety. Today it has become a political symbol, and small gifts to the temple are perceived as acts of defiance, which the repressive military regime over-looks to maintain its own veneer of piety.

All of us who have lived within the chambers of composition housed within the temples of literature daily witness the power of writing. We see the difference that writing makes in the life chances, personal development, intellectual growth, and spiritual well-being of our students and the difference writing makes in the work, common wisdom, and cultural cohesion

of communities. It is our good fortune to participate in and draw strength from this great force.

We regularly see writing to be greater than the space the academy invites it into; simultaneously, we are regularly reminded of institutional and intellectual walls that inhibit our vision and our range of action. Nonetheless, even the most straitened of visitors, entering through the most official of main doors, senses that this is far from a trivial god. So people have come to love this god even in its most orthodox emanations, with good reason.

I grew up in a household and a school system that were ever mindful of the monuments of Western culture. In the postwar New York suburbs, elite culture seemed to provide a meritocratic pathway for upward mobility for the children of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. My parents' socialist yearnings of Brooklyn in the 1930s had turned to dreams of financial success for themselves and professional achievement for their children. I was given encouragement and access to books, libraries, museums, theaters. Children's adventure stories soon turned to the hagiographies of the Landmarks of America series and of scientists' lives. I read of the personal struggle for achievement ever driving the communal journey of progress.

But history, science, and *Mad* magazine told me of complexity and critique. Steinbeck and Twain, socialist muckraking novels, and union history led me to Upton Sinclair and Bertolt Brecht as I moved through my teens. Too high-minded for early rock and roll, I tuned into lefty folk and early blues but also saturated myself with the wonderful optimism of musical comedies and the densities of classical music: Pete Seeger, Leadbelly, Mary Martin, and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

I wrote and formed my consciousness in imitation of what I read and heard. In the eighth grade I wrote my history final exam imitating the rolling cadences of a film we had seen about the great Johnstown flood. I later found out it was Vachel Lindsay who inspired that exam essay. Reading Twain gave me more tools to be a cynical wise-mouth, a role I practiced in hopeless long letters to young women I met at summer arts and music camps. Brecht gave me a sharp-edged vision of life, consciousness, and the theater, which I puzzled over in many essays. After reading political philosophy in a summer program during high school, I came back with involuted considerations of fundamental principles. Four years of a citywide program for high school students being groomed for careers in science taught me not only to dwell in intolerable detail and to explain beyond the patience of all reasonable mortals but also to seek underlying principles that would lend a beautiful clarity to a vision—a vision that had to be plausibly true, empirically possible, and as close to what we can experience as possible given the limits of our means of representation. That early hands-on experience with science clued me in to how messy the process was and also how ambitious—just like writing. One could create something that would

make a difference; with enough hard work and inspired thought, one could see new things about our life and world, gain evidence, understand principles, write them down, and make them visible. One could formulate statements to make sense of things.

This version of science fit well with a version of politics and social involvement I was growing up into—making the world better by understanding it better and not believing any of the pieties that we were taught to justify the naughtiness of the way things were. The civil rights movement opened up a clarity of vision that seemed to put the lie to the world we had inherited, as did the antinuclear movement. My undergraduate years coincided with the misperceptions, stupidities, and lies that led us into the waste of the Vietnam War. I remember at first thinking the government must know better, must have reasons, must have some information. But when the government mounted its best arguments and facts in a series of public white papers, it was evident that there was no more than met the eye.

I became even more stubborn about having to understand what I was being asked to believe, to be given persuasive arguments and convincing evidence. The games of the intellect, the transformation of experience into words, the arguments people made to themselves and in public—all these things were, it began to dawn on me, deathly real. We were in history; we are always in history; and words are much of what we use to create that history.

But in my own increasing stubbornness to follow only the path I came to understand, I could not align with the doctrines of the New Left that were being born on the campuses at that time. Nor could I align with another movement that by accident I came in close contact with, a movement that has since become as influential as their wildest hopes would have it. It was a movement that I came to reject early, to define myself against; but in that dialectic of argument, I was forced to contemplate my own answers to the questions they raised. During my undergraduate years at Cornell, I lived in a small scholarship house, where we were honored by the presence of resident faculty guests the likes of Madame Frances Perkins, legendary secretary of labor under Franklin Roosevelt and first woman cabinet member. Allan Bloom was another large presence in the house during my stay there. He was resident in the house for two of those years, and he developed a coterie of followers among my fellow house members—a coterie that was to form part of the core group of the neoconservatives who have had such an influence since the mid-1970s. In endless discussions over meals and late into the night, I was never quite able to accept any of the principles that seemed to drive this group of followers of Leo Strauss to believe that they were an elite of philosophers who had the right and responsibility to shape the lives of others—if only they could get their hands on the levers of power. Although I almost always wound up on the “other side” in every discussion,

I was attuned to ask fundamental questions about political and social order, the relation of culture and communication to the constitution of the state, and the ways of life possible within any regime. This perspective has helped me see the link between individual acts of communication and the various orders of society we live in, a link that I later discovered could be fruitfully explored through the social sciences.

In the prayer wheel of undergraduate majors, I spun past many of the notches—physics, math, German, government. I wound up in English. I was in part motivated by personal family issues that I was working out through the fictions of literature and the fictions of criticism (hardly an unusual motivation in literature departments, but a motivation that leads to many views with little distanced perspective and little intersubjective reliability). But I was also attracted by the powerful tools of intellectual and representational shaping I was being exposed to. I was fascinated by the structure of Shakespeare's plots and the emotional worlds created within the poetic spaces that came into being within the plot structures. I came to appreciate the large architectonic structures of Milton's writing that allowed grand visions of the workings of the world to take shape. Through drama I came to understand how each line, each utterance was embedded in layers of context and authorial structuring. I also became interested in the phenomenology and social distribution of styles that enacted different life worlds for the various characters and for the various audiences. The voices of different poems showed me different ways of being and different stances one could adopt toward the world one found oneself in.

Again my own writing imitated and drew on the resources of the writers that filled my head. As a freshman I wrote a paper on Faulkner's 1,500-word sentence that quoted internally an equally long sentence by Faulkner, and I wrote a long *Waste Land*-ish poem enacting the ditherings of my teenage love passions. (Of course I had a crush on Jean Blackall, my freshman writing professor, who allowed me such indulgences.) As a senior and then a first-year graduate student, I wrote long architectonic papers that laid out structured phenomenologies of text worlds and then Shandean papers that disrupted those orders to create small comedic spaces of sympathy. And I began to explore the romantic imagination, becoming comfortable with metaphor and synesthesia in my poetry and thought.

At the same time as I was assembling mental spaces for myself from reading and reenacting the literary tradition, I began reexamining the social spaces my own language habits were creating. I was dissatisfied with the distances I was constantly creating with others, partly from my stubbornness in working through my views, partly from the supreme confidence I had in my judgments, and partly from the language habits I had learned in my less-than-functional family. I began to observe what I said and how that influenced the unfolding of conversations and relationships. I had a long

way to go, and my personality remakes were pretty clumsy, but I did begin to see concretely what it means to make oneself and one's relationships through language. This predisposed me for some powerful experiences I was to have shortly thereafter.

Before then, however, I was to experience graduate school and some fundamental questioning about the profession I was preparing for. Although I saw that reading of literature offered some personal pleasure and expansions of my own mind, eventually those pleasures wore thin. In addition, all the major scholarly and critical tasks (as of the late 1960s) seemed pretty well mined out. Even if one found a "strangely neglected topic," as Amis' Lucky Jim put it, becoming an acolyte to another's accomplishment, an accomplishment of another place and time, struck me as a sort of weak goal for one's life. Even more, I couldn't see that professing literature did much for anyone else or for our society in the aggregate, despite the fact that my graduate education was funded by a National Defense Education Act fellowship. People on their own (with perhaps the help of a small number of scholarly guides) could read pretty much whatever interested them. The large industry of literary studies seemed to me only to support class ideology, the high end of the leisure entertainment business, and the personal indulgences of its academic employees. In short, it seemed a selfish, and in the long run unsatisfying, kind of life, not quite appropriate for an adult. Becoming a creative writer seemed a bit more attractive, and I began to put more energy into my own poems and fictions. The two teachers who meant much to me that year were the poet Howard Nemerov, who kept alive the fire of language, and the poet and critic J. V. Cunningham, who cut through the inflations of literary criticism by considering the material and intellectual conditions of actual authors. Cunningham also taught me, as he taught all of his students, the power of knowing a few well-placed facts and the power of writing a sharply focused line.

The U.S. government, desiring from me more direct service in the national defense, solved my dilemma by removing my student deferment, as they did for all first-year graduate students in the spring of 1968. I did not intend, however, to allow myself to be put in a position where I would have to kill others out of self-defense for a cause that no one was yet able to explain to me satisfactorily. After examining my alternatives (including an exploratory trip across the Canadian border), I discovered that New York City was recruiting graduate students who needed draft deferments to teach inner-city elementary school. It seemed an honorable alternative, and I took it. We were given the appearance of training over the summer, but I got my real training from books like Herbert Kohl's *Thirty-Six Children*.

After Labor Day we were assigned to schools—just in time for the Ocean Hill–Brownsville strike, where the unions were resisting community control of the school districts. Despite my long attachment to unions, I sided with

the communities, and everything I saw about how those schools were run confirmed that the community was justified in wanting changes. My first day of teaching began with three teachers (an old-line socialist, an experienced teacher with strong ties to the community, and an untrained and overeducated college boy) and several community parents breaking the locks on PS 93K in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. My task that day was to keep 70 kindergartners and first-graders amused for several hours. What the day lacked as an educational experience for the students, it made up for as an educational experience for me. Events gradually became a bit less exciting, and my teaching did improve.

I came away from my 2 years of teaching first and third grade with a firm conviction that literacy was important—it made real difference in people's lives. I saw children in my classes make rapid cognitive, social, and behavioral changes as they learned to read and write, and I saw the older children in the school developing personalities, goals, and social connections depending on which side of the literacy divide they perceived themselves to be. I also learned that inner-city schools at that time, with their funding, social, political, and numerous other problems, made it nearly impossible to carry forward a progressive, student-oriented program. In order to have anything like useful reading materials for my class, for example, I had to get up at 5, write (typing a first draft directly onto Rexograph masters) a one- or two-page story about two children whose lives resembled the lives of my students, and then arrive in the school early enough to break into the basement room where the Rexograph was kept because I did not have official approval to make copies. Of course, I had to purchase the paper and the masters and smuggle them into the school, as there were no supplies.

At the same time as I was learning the deep pleasure of making a difference in other people's lives, I entered into psychotherapy with clinical psychologist Tony Gabriele. This experience is relevant here because of the nature of Tony's beliefs and the character of his therapy. He saw unhappiness and marginality in life coming from failures of social relations. Social relations, he believed, could be improved by increasing social competence, coordination, and consensuality—not to get along in a superficial way, but to build those intimacies that met our needs, allowed us to share what was important to us, and gave us space to say what we had to say to those who could listen. Furthermore, he saw the heart of competence, coordination, and consensuality in our ability to use language. His main technique of therapy was to engage in reflexive self-observations of language behaviors. That is, I had to learn to be able to look on the interactions I was part of so as to be able to monitor and examine the consequences of my own participation. Progress was made not by suppression of behaviors (quite to the contrary, he encouraged spontaneity and candor) but by coming to see the effects of various behaviors. His techniques bore some relation to the

microsociology of conversational analysts and of Erving Goffman. His work is little known outside the group of people who had direct contact with him because he published little. Just before he died a few years ago, he completed a book manuscript, but it remains unpublished.

Tony provided me the key to putting together many of the themes in my own quest and then brought those themes home to the moment-by-moment experience of life. My life became something more than just a bookish life. Furthermore, what I learned from Tony about spoken language applied directly back onto the reflective production of written text, improved through inspection and revision, to achieve consequential social interactions. Tony also introduced me to and showed me the concrete value of innovative thinkers such as Harry Stack Sullivan, George Herbert Mead, and Gregory Bateson. The social sciences became really interesting.

After being fired three times by administrators and rehired twice by the community, and now having a 4F draft rating (in part ensured by the medical consequences of trying to get anything accomplished in my school), I returned to graduate school in literature. It was to be another decade before there was anything like a program in rhetoric, and I had no better idea than to complete a degree I had started. Although my strangely neglected dissertation topic, *Poems Occasioned by the Death of Queen Elizabeth I and the Accession of King James I*, seems hopelessly arcane, it actually grew out of my long-standing interest in the class distribution of styles and the relation of style to emotion, and it foreshadowed my interests in rhetorical situation and genre. The dissertation's main defining characteristic was that I could finish it fast, knowing I wanted to get out and get on with whatever was to follow. Cunningham, a writer of epigrams and other very short forms, suggested that sufficient conclusion for my dissertation would be QED (*Quod erat demonstratum*: "which was to be demonstrated or proved"). He was invaluable in aiding my quick getaway from graduate school before it ground me down.

What followed was the academic job market collapse of 1971. After a period of scrambling, I wound up with a full-time position at Baruch College in City University of New York (CUNY), which had recently adopted an open admissions policy. The line I was hired into was funded by an educational opportunity program, and I was told I had a particular responsibility for developmental writing. This was a job that made sense to me. In my pretenure years, I gestured toward the kinds of publications my department would recognize; I still have, sitting in my filing cabinet, the definitive readings of Nabokov's oeuvre, Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*, the grotesque in the writings of Graham Greene, and the social parameters of occasional verse in the Renaissance. My real energy, however, went into composition, as I started to figure out what was going on in my classrooms and what students would benefit from. After tenure I gave up the pretense of literary studies, leaving that to my colleagues who still harbored visions of an ivy-covered life.



Although on my campus there were few teachers who cared to do more than blame their students for their own fallen station in life, several of the campuses at CUNY were facing the task of open admissions with some energy and commitment. These were the days of Mina Shaughnessy and her group at City College, Ken Bruffee and his first exploration of peer tutoring at Brooklyn College, Sondra Perl at Hostos Community College, Harvey Wiener at LaGuardia, Bob Lyons and Don McQuade at Queens, and many others who were fully and creatively committed to basic writing. We met regularly at city and regional conferences, CUNY meetings, and our own organization, the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors. Because of the political and institutional moment and Mina Shaughnessy's personal force, there was even for a short period universitywide administrative support for writing.

During that brief period of excitement, some campuses were able to build permanent campus commitments to writing, whereas on other campuses those interested in writing had to get by ameliorating programmatic indifference. For a number of years, I was the only member of my department's composition committee. After more than a dozen years of lobbying, the powers that be finally funded a director of freshman composition and then an English as a second language director, so that our 100 or so part-time teachers would have at least a minimum of coordination and direction. Our 30 to 40 tenure-line faculty, despite the fact that two thirds of their teaching load was in composition, were left largely to their own literary devices.

The students at Baruch were the most motivated, appreciative, and interesting with whom I have worked, although they were not uniformly well prepared nor were they necessarily interested in traditional liberal arts education. Because Baruch was located in midtown Manhattan and specialized in business degrees, we drew on all the people who inhabited the city and on immigrants from all corners of the world. Their lives were overburdened, and their personal problems were pressing. Anything teachers offered that they perceived would help them through the complications of their lives and would provide them some hope of social mobility gained their serious commitment. They knew what hard work was. On the other hand, if teachers could not demonstrate to them the value of what they were demanding, the students treated the course simply as a contract that had to be fulfilled on the way to a degree that they knew would have some exchange value.

Their need and appreciation motivated me to dig into my own privileged experience with language and familiarity with the academy to share as much as I could articulate and then to go out and investigate more how writing worked in the world. My reigning metaphors for my first years of teaching were "letting the cat out of the bag," "spilling the beans," demystifying the class secrets of language and literacy. To my mind, teaching writing was such a political act that it never needed any overt political comment or

political teaching. In fact, overt politics would distract us from the task of bringing new groups and individuals into positions of economic and social power and might even undermine the motivation of the students, who for the most part were more interested in the fates of themselves and their families than in any politics. Often enough, they saw their interests tied to political positions that would not be sympathetic to the kind of social change we were enacting in the class. Baruch was a business school, and these were students who were preparing for careers in business, often with the strongest of motivations. I never quite understood my colleagues who saw the task of the humanities as to save these students from the choices they were committed to. I saw more promise in helping them become what they wanted to become.

Such concerns drove my own inquiries into what kind of writing it took to succeed in the academy and in the world, how academic and professional writing were carried out in intertextual webs of specialized communication, and how writing acted as a social force. Writing from sources, writing across the curriculum, writing in the disciplines, the rhetoric of science and technology, social studies of science, genre theory, writing and social theory, and activity theory—my developing interests in these areas is available in the open record of my publications. I do not recapitulate those pathways here except to say that textbook writing has been as much a path of discovery and contribution for me as have been research and theory writing. The payoff for our field is in the increased competence of writers as they move through their lives, and textbooks directly deliver tools for writers and teachers.

Rhetoric and composition have provided me a position from which to participate in the great drama of literacy without being encompassed, consumed, constrained, and submerged within the narrow worlds of literature, even while they have allowed me to draw on everything I have learned through my experience of literature. Rhetoric and composition have not, however, provided a way out of the institutional dominance of literature. Each of us in composition has experienced our own version of this problem; I reserve my own quaintly painful anecdotes for late nights at conference parties. I must say, however, that no English department to which I have been attached has made it easy to ply my trade or profess my profession. In each school the particulars have been different, but the forces have been the same—forces one violates only at one's own cost.

Despite the kinds of institutional struggles and punishments that seem to go with the territory, rhetoric and composition have provided satisfactions that would not have been available to me had I stayed in more traditional academic paths. Writing, this “strangely neglected topic,” is sporadically studied by a few anthropologists, a few psychologists, a few historians, and a few professors of education concerned with the earliest stages of literacy. Yet modern society is deeply entangled with literacy. Literate acts underlie

modern law, government, commerce, finances, bureaucracy, scriptural religions, knowledge production and dissemination, technology, journalism, schools and universities themselves, literary and popular literature, printing, the Internet, and uncountable other aspects of the lives we lead. Composition, looking outward to the uses of writing in the world, is awakening to the enormous power and ubiquity of writing. Isn't it amazing that there are almost no university departments directly attending to this most fundamental of human competencies and accomplishments? Isn't it amazing that the departments we are housed in are devoted to only a very small subset of the world's literate productions, that subset that is fictional, engaged during moments of leisure, associated with the cultural habits of limited classes of people, and oblivious to the sociocultural-psychological processes it is part of? Isn't this world filled with wonders? Isn't it a wonder to look upon these things?

Santa Barbara, California  
February 12, 1997