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The Uncertainty of Certainty: Exploring a Dialectic

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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The fostering of a dialectic between Certainty and Uncertainty
and the perspectives of reality and "truth" that each engenders
is necessary for writing and the teaching of writing. This
necessity arises from the fact that a privileging of either
extreme, at the expense of the other, is antithetical to work
for the progress of not simply the teaching of writing but of
the greater society and culture to which it would serve.
Whether the pursuit of Certainty that culminated in late-
nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America in the birth of
"Current-Traditional Rhetoric" or, conversely, the pursuit of
Uncertainty that spread throughout academia during the "Post-
Modern" era, either choice is detrimental to those who would
strive for that progress within academic writing instruction and
beyond. In the end, both possibilities serve the continuation

and profusion of the status quo. The strict worship of either

of these supposed contraries begets the very same dualistic,

"black or white" perceptions. Through my research, I explore

those separate pursuits and then examine the possibilities for

founding this crucial dialectic between them. I also

investigate not simply how I have attempted to pursue that

dialectic in my own writing classes but also the results of

those attempts.

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Introduction

 This work is the culmination of a journey that extends from my introduction to the field of composition and rhetoric and to the fulfillment of my doctoral studies with my dissertation. Because of this, it is a very personal journey that has served to define my philosophy of writing as well as my philosophy of the teaching of writing. The spread of time that this work represents and all that I have done throughout that time, as a student and as a teacher, has been inspirited by the twin urges of Uncertainty and Certainty: not simply the contrary but kindred influences exerted by each of them upon perspectives of reality and "truth" but also how to exist - to teach and to write and to think - amidst that stress and struggle that effuses from their opposition. All too often, the tension of those opposing calls compels those who experience it to *choose* one of them over the other. To *worship* one of them, almost like a god, while the other is forgotten. Forsaken. All too often, this is unconsciously done, leaving the choice to appear "natural" or "sanctified" or both. And all too often, no matter whether it is Uncertainty or Certainty that becomes deified, this choosing breeds severely dualistic "black or white" perspectives of reality and "truth" that allow for no confusion, no contradiction, and no compromise. "Right or wrong," "good or

evil," "us or them": all of these define the perceptions of the
world, of those living in it, and of the culture and history
that they both inherit and hand down that is conceived by that
bipolarity. Nothing different and nothing questionable, nothing
new, is allowed into such a scenario because to do so would
threaten the sovereign epistemology upon which it was founded
and, through this, the authority and order and control it
affords those who would promote and propagate it. In the end
then, it is a situation where neither variation nor progress is
likely because they are simply not wanted and not welcome. For
those who exhibit these perspectives - whether consciously or
not, whether willingly or not - reality and "truth" are static
things. It is a phenomenon witnessed most arrantly amidst the
worlds of religion, of science, and of politics. And through
this three-fold influence, it is also witnessed, for my
fundamental purposes in this work, amidst the world of rhetoric,
the inheritor and veritable executor of the reality and "truth"
that they would see abide. It is for this very reason, then,
that those within the field of composition and rhetoric who
would seek to nurture that variation and progress through their
scholarship, their research, and their teaching must consciously
avoid that "black or white," "us or them" exaltation of either
Certainty or Uncertainty and the exclusion of the other.

But the way out of this philosophical and pedagogical dilemma is neither to refuse to choose between Uncertainty and Certainty nor to "sort of" choose the both of them. Either would ignore the tension simmering between those contraries, avoiding the problem that that opposition poses rather than facing it. However, according to some theorists and researchers, such as John Dewey, William Perry, and Peter Elbow, the conflict between Certainty and Uncertainty can be used to further and deepen the thinking, the teaching, and the writing over which both hold sway and, consequently, *both* are necessary and *both* are crucial. Both must be worshipped, as it were, in order for their influence to be fully realized and, thus, for that influence to have full impact. But they must be worshipped in a way that there is an unending fluidity between them, the one yielding to the other when it is time. The relationship between Uncertainty and Certainty has to be an always changing thing and, because of this, this relationship has to take the form of a dialectic: a continual state of liminaltiy where the calls of these two extremes of perceiving reality and "truth" are indulged at different times of the composing as well as the teaching process. The ultimate purpose of this, as well as its ultimate promise, is that, through this dialectic of Certainty and Uncertainty, reality and "truth" will also come to exist - to be perceived and conceived through teaching and writing and

thinking – as a dialectic: always changing, always fluid. As a result, a writer or a teacher's perspective of reality or "truth" will not simply welcome all that is different and questionable and new but will flourish, further and deepen, *because* of them.

But how does this happen? How exactly do you, as a writer and as a teacher of writing, foster that dialectic between Uncertainty and Certainty? Where and when should it happen, especially if that dialectic is, necessarily, always in flux, without some already defined moment of transition between the two? These questions have brought me to this work and the five chapters that comprise it are an attempt to explore and explain them as well as to arrive at a greater understanding of both Certainty and Uncertainty and that critical relationship between them.

I begin by setting the stage for the exploration that follows by describing my entrance into the field of composition and rhetoric and, with it, my first exposure to the philosophical and pedagogical concept of Uncertainty: writing with Uncertainty and, in turn, teaching towards Uncertainty. In doing so, I explain what these mean and, through it, work to define their polar opposite in the form of Certainty. However, this narrative, while portraying the beginnings of my philosophy of writing and of teaching, also establishes my exposure,

through experiences in the writing classroom early in my doctoral studies, to the unfortunate inadequacy of worshipping the one extreme while shunning the other. These experiences revealed to me the problematic nature of such a "black or white" privileging and, consequently, that crucial necessity of deliberately and strenuously working towards founding that dialectic between Uncertainty and Certainty. And thus arose my fundamental question: *how?*

With this established, in the second chapter, I explore the worship of Certainty that happened during the late 18th and 19th century in America with the birth of what would come to be known, most often derisively, as "Current-Traditional Rhetoric." It was this time that Robert Connors believed exhibited "extraordinary changes [in rhetoric] that took place over just long enough a period that they were taken as normal evolution by those involved" (*Composition-Rhetoric* 24), these "changes" almost utterly transmuting a "2,500-year-old intellectual tradition" through "deep cultural changes in nineteenth-century America" (24). To Sharon Crowley, these rhetorical "changes" that Connors observed were rooted in a singularly "modern" epistemology that "standardize[d] and forecast[ed] how the writing process should develop" (*The Methodical Memory* 167), thus "associat[ing] discourse production with only one faculty – reason" (157). Because of this, the rise of "Current-

Traditional Rhetoric" represented an almost utterly exclusive promotion of Certainty, something that satisfied a 19th century America's hunger for industrialization, the scientific method, and a peculiarly Western perspective of reality and "truth" that sought to control, order, and, in the end, rule natural phenomena. Through this examination, I root that zeitgeist of 19th century America in a "quest for Certainty," as John Dewey called it, that also defined Western Religion, Western Science, and Western Politics, thus distinguishing them as the true forebears of Current-Traditional Rhetoric.

After this, I explore, conversely, the worship of Uncertainty that began with its arrival to the forefront of composition philosophy and pedagogy during the latter half of the 20th century in response to the decades-long reign of that Current-Traditional Rhetoric and its perceived limitations and ills. But through vehement attempts to undo what postmodern writing theorists and instructors saw as not only an intellectually but also socially domineering paradigm, some of them would privilege Uncertainty to such an extreme that it became – as Linda Flower called it – the "new certainty": the attempt of "postmodern theory" to "assert its own unassailable assumptions" (*Learning to Rival* 157) With this examination, I explain how this pursuit of, again, the different and the questionable and the new transmogrified back into Certainty:

the same old thing all over again. This unfortunate reversion

has profoundly detrimental implications for whatever socially or

culturally progressive intentions writing teachers and theorists

guilty of such a possibly unconscious complicity may have had.

In the end, I also offer a possibility for how this situation

can be undone or avoided.

Once I have explored those pursuits of Certainty and

Uncertainty in the absence of the other, I then explore, in the

fourth chapter, the nature of that dialectic between them, as

advocated by education and composition theorists like John

Dewey, William Perry, and Peter Elbow, to whose theories of

thinking and writing and teaching such a thing is crucial. In

their seminal works, they pursue separate inquiries into that

dialectic based upon their very own philosophies and pedagogical

agendas but, in doing so, arrive at some *very* similar

conclusions. Because of this, taken as a whole, their analyses

offer a compelling rationale for why the founding of that

dialectic between Certainty and Uncertainty is an utter

necessity for those who would see how they teach and how they

write and simply how they think deepen and evolve. Juxtaposed

against their theories, then, I offer by way of comparison my

very own attempt to foster that dialectic with the freshman

writing courses that I have taught, the most recent of which

were during the 2007-2008 school year at the University of

Delaware. After describing my own teaching philosophy, I then detail my methods in those courses, from readings to writing assignments, and explain my rationale behind it all.

And in the final chapter, I turn from this theoretical explication about the "why" and the "how" of the dialectic and survey those from within the field of composition and rhetoric who have worked to bring such a thing to their very own writing courses and, as a result, realize it through actual classroom practice. In doing so, I also return to those freshman writing courses I related in the previous chapter and scrutinize my very own transition from theory to practice. Through doing so, I explore how that dialectic between Uncertainty and Certainty and its potential fared under my instruction: what I did, or did not do, in those courses, with what results, and to what effect.

As I have already stated, this work is the culmination of an exploration that began almost a decade ago. It is thus essentially rooted in ruminations of the past: of my very own past as a writer, a student, and a teacher as well as the past of the field of composition and rhetoric. It is furthermore rooted in reflections upon how these two pasts intertwine and interweave, the latter compelling the former in ways both known and unknown. Because of this, it is deliberately retrospective: a looking backwards more than it is a looking forwards. This is not because of a disregard or distaste for recent currents of

theory and research permeating throughout the conversation of the field but simply because the curiosity that brought me to this work finds its consummation, again, in the past, with the past, rather than the "current" or the "new."

This said, I also believe that the "past"-ness of the past is not always what it seems to be. Concerns and dilemmas of the past can linger unseen and, through them, the past can indeed infiltrate and inform the present much more than we ever realize – or *want* to realize. My future research may follow such an investigation. But as things stand now, however, this work does indeed offer a few things to the field and those working, teaching and researching, within it today. First, I believe that it will serve as an explanation of why those polarized extremes of Certainty and Uncertainty exist as epistemological traps that are so very easy to become snared in and, so very unfortunately, crippled by. Second, I also believe that it will work to explain the essential worth of that dialectic to those who would try to not simply stay clear of those hazardous mires but urge their work, whether writing or the teaching of writing or both, beyond their current limitations. And last but not least, I believe that it will stand as a testimonial to the dialectical nature of human reality.

Very simply, life is change. You are born and you die, but, between those two definite and defining moments of

existence, everything flows. Everything is in flux, no matter how it may appear at some moment in time. Because of this, the reality and "truth" of life is also in flux. It changes depending upon any number of variables, those foreseeable and those unforeseeable. Writing is no different. Teaching is no different. And when you realize this and accept it – the flow and the flux - much of the "pain" experienced with those pursuits, whether it is the "pain" of sitting before a piece of writing that isn't saying what you want it to say or the "pain" of standing at the head of a classroom where your lesson plan isn't doing what you want it to do, can be released, can be let go, because there is always a new start: a fresh, blank page or the beginning of the next class. The crucial question is whether you reflect upon that "pain" and learn from it or continue to bring it down upon your head over and over again. But if you open yourself to that flow and that flux and open yourself to what life, what writing and teaching, brings you, it is indeed the road to "wonder."

I.

     With no reservations, I call myself a "writer." And for as
long as I can remember, I have been a writer. My earliest
memory of actually writing is of a little tale I wrote on thick
elementary school paper when I was in the first grade. It was a
story, but a few pages long and which I illustrated myself,
about the "King of the Rocks" and the boy who found him in the
woods. I was only about seven or eight years old and I wrote
it, but I do not know why I wrote it. It was not an assignment
for my first grade teacher, Miss Pennen. It was not for
something my mother told me to write to keep me occupied while
she cooked dinner. If I had to say, I wrote it simply to *write*
it – for the pleasure of writing: the pleasure of plumbing my
childhood imagination; the pleasure of creation with a yellow
No. 2 pencil and a box of crayons; the pleasure of sheer
exploration with thoughts and words and blank sheets of paper,
embracing that question on every child's lips … "WHY?" I wrote
it to take Wonder by the hand and follow it wherever it would
lead me. Almost twenty years later, I would return to this
earliest remembered occasion of my writing with my Master's
thesis, in order to pursue further that very notion of "wonder."

In my thesis, I saw "writing with wonder" as the veritable opposite of how I had learned and been expected to write throughout all the years of school that followed my youth's visit with the "King of the Rocks." It was writing trained, like some twisted ornamental tree in a Medieval garden, by a prescribed, and pervasive, set of rules and regulations concerned with the thesis, the supporting evidence, the introduction and conclusion, the transitions, the quotations, the five paragraphs, and, last but not least, the grammar – an outward appearance of propriety like aluminum siding upon a prefabricated tract house of words. Although I had learned my lessons well, very well in fact, from the first grade through the twelfth and then, even more, later at university, and although learning those lessons had brought me success with the SATs, term papers, application personal statements, in-class essays, the MCATs, and even laboratory reports, I did not truly look upon it as "writing."

While I cannot say this was always the case – as there were essays and papers that asked me for more than what Linda Brodkey, in her essay "Writing on the Bias," had called "the ritual performances of penmanship, spelling, grammar, punctuation, organization, and […] thinking" (34) – the "writing" assignments that were put before me, more often than not, were nothing more than algebra equations, my job being to

fill in all of the empty variables. My success with such

writing was dependent upon my ability to prove and solve those

equations with the lowest possible margin of error. That would

be the goal: to write with blinders on to arrive at my

predetermined destination, my thesis' safe haven. For me, such

"writing" was simply a tool to produce an already determined

agenda through a similarly already determined course. This

"writing," then, was an exhibitory act, a way of presenting (or

representing) that which is already known, that which is

certain. Because the object here was to position the writer as

an authority and the purpose of this "writing" then was to

prove, beyond any and all doubt, the validity of its basic

thesis, only that which very easily fits within this limited,

and limiting, scenario would be regarded as useful or important.

Cast aside is anything that does not help the writer attain a

position of unquestionable authority through this strict process

of proving because it is deemed unsuitable for the job at hand.

Because of this, the unknown, the problematic, the

contradictory, never arrive to the page. Because they pose a

threat to that provability and, thus, do not allow the writer to

feel safe, such things are utterly ignored. But this safety –

the safety of certainty – although comforting because of the

false sense of textual dominance, that it offers, is the end

product of "writing" that is, in the end, unchallenging, uninspiring, and uncritical.

For me then, and still now, such a thing is not writing. To reverse such a situation is to write with, as Janet Emig put it in "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing" more than forty years ago now, "at least a small obeisance in the direction of the untidy, of the convoluted, of the not-wholly-known" (48). It is to write as if struck by Hélène Cixous' (after Franz Kafka's) "blow on the head," a jarring happening that allows the writer to commune with what she refers to, in her book *Three Steps in the Ladder of Writing*, as "the unknown," that "lightning region that takes your breath away, where you instantaneously feel at sea and where the moorings are severed with the already-written, the already-known. This 'blow on the head' that Kafka describes is the blow on the head of the deadman/deadwoman we are. And that is the awakening from the dead" (59). What I see Emig and Cixous both trying to describe here is what I believe, looking back now, I had experienced when I wrote about "The King of the Rocks" in the first grade, as well as other times since: writing from, writing with, "wonder." And my thesis' investigation of that same sense of "wonder" was inspired by a simple urging directive: "Write with uncertainty." While I then saw writing with "wonder" and writing with "uncertainty" as existing as the very same thing, I

now have my doubts, which is what brings me here: the question

of "uncertainty."

     The semester before I wrote my graduate thesis, the last

semester of my Master's coursework at Montclair State, I took a

course called "Rhetorical Theory and the Teaching of Writing."

It was taught by a professor whom I had heard about many times

before from some of my fellow graduate assistants who had

already taken this same class. His name was Bob Whitney. When

they spoke of him, it was almost with reverence as well as

respect, as if he were some sort of religious personage, a yogi

or a shaman or some such thing, who had opened their eyes to

hitherto untold "truths" about writing or teaching or both. It

was not difficult to see why some responded to him as they did,

this man who appeared to me more like a hippie lumberjack than a

composition professor, as he exhibited a reserved yet roused

passion for writing, reading, and, perhaps more than anything

else, questioning. And if he did fulfill the role of graduate

school "clergyman" for some of my classmates, what we worshipped

in that small, windowless room that semester was "uncertainty."

The words "write with uncertainty" became the veritable mantra

of the class over the span of that term. Almost everything

about the course was intended to offer us a portrait of that

"uncertainty," not only philosophically but pedagogically as

well – what it was supposed to "do." It was at the heart of our

readings, our class discussions, our writings. You could not

escape from the word, the concept behind it, and I can only

speculate how much of an earsore it must have been for those in

the class who would not subscribe to Bob's theories – and there

were indeed some who did refuse, whether peacefully or not. It

would seem that for at least some of these particular students

in his class, that "uncertainty" was simply too amorphous and

too abstract – too theoretical. And it also seemed that there

was no little frustration for some with the fact that he did not

offer an exact definition of what he meant by "uncertainty" or

"writing with uncertainty," other than the utter necessity of

questioning and then questioning some more. But I believe,

still, that, if you stood back and looked at the whole of what

was being said and written and read in the class, a compelling

portrait did indeed appear, albeit somewhat indirectly. For me,

this was something that happened most intensely through the

books and essays that he put before us.

There was, again, French feminist literary critic and

writing theorist Hélène Cixous. In her book *Three Steps in the

Ladder of Writing*, she wrote of what she called the "Worst,"

"the most unknown and best unknown." For Cixous, it is this

"Worst" that "we are looking for when we write":

> We go toward the best known unknown thing, where
> knowing and not knowing touch, where we hope we will
> know what is unknown. Where we hope we will not be
> afraid of understanding the incomprehensible, facing

> the invisible, hearing the inaudible, thinking the
> unthinkable, which is of course: thinking. Thinking
> is trying to think the unthinkable: thinking the
> thinkable is not worth the effort. Painting is
> trying to paint what you cannot paint and writing is
> writing what you cannot know before you have written:
> it is preknowing and not knowing, blindly, with
> words. (38)

Although her words here are a little heady, the whole of *Three Steps* steeped in that post-structuralist "Derrida-ese," I can remember being utterly struck by the "truth" of what Cixious had to say about writing. Deep, critical, and "true" writing is born only from the confrontation of what is known and what is unknown, where certainty and that semblance of safety that it offers fall away in the face of the incongruous and the perplexing. To her, it is only from such an experience, in that "lightning region" I referenced earlier, that "writing" worth writing and, therein, "thinking" worth thinking can be done.

A similar sentiment was shared by Nobel Prize-winning progressive novelist, Doris Lessing, who went further to express, revealingly for me, the social and cultural consequence of such different ways of seeing and thinking and writing. In *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*, her book of philosophical essays that had also been assigned us to read that semester, Lessing wrote about "the other eye," what she saw as humanity's capacity to conceive of ourselves, our society and our culture, "not […] how we like to think we behave and function, which is

often very flattering" (5). This "other eye" of Lessing's is

the ability of see through and beyond …

> [T]he great comforting illusions, and part illusions,
> which every society uses to keep up its confidence in
> itself. These are hard to examine, and the best we
> can hope for is that a kindly friend from another
> culture will enable us to look at our culture with
> dispassionate eyes. (33)

To Lessing, it is the "novelist" – the writer – who can offer a

society, a culture, those "foreign eyes" because they and their

writing have the potential of "enabl[ing] us to see ourselves as

others see us" (7) through a possible movement forward into

greater objectivity – perhaps that same "lightning region" of

Cixous' where the known clashes against the unknown. And it

this unfortunately all-too-rare "social self-consciousness,"

those "cool, serious questions and their cool, serious,

dispassionate answers," that Lessing believes "could save us"

(42). For that "other eye" to remain closed and those "cool,

serious questions" never to be asked, let alone answered, is for

the "great comforting illusions" to be propagated as "truth" and

"reality," authoritative in their utter certainty.

And this conversation, begun by Cixous and continued by

Lessing, was furthered by revolutionary Brazilian educational

philosopher Paulo Freire with his book, *Pedagogy of the

Oppressed*, and, therein, the sociopolitical implications of this

perceiving and conceiving of the "uncertain" made much more

explicit. Freire's titular pedagogical philosophy is a

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"problem-posing education": a "constant unveiling of reality
[…] [which] striv[es] for the emergence of consciousness and
critical intervention in reality" (68). Without the cultivation
of such "critical consciousness," as American "Freire"-ian
pedagogical theorist Ira Shor called it, and, thereby, without
seeing what does not "fit," the "uncertain," within an
unquestioned domineering status quo, sociopolitical change
cannot and will not happen. And for such change to happen,
Freire asserts the utter necessity of praxis: "reflection and
action upon the world in order to transform it" (36). For
Freire, "critical reflection" – "think[ing] the unthinkable" and
"see[ing] ourselves as others see us" - is simply not enough:
things must be done out in the world. And the beginnings of
such praxis would seem to be writing, for according to Freire:
"There is no true word that is not the same time a praxis.
Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world" (75).
Furthermore, he continues: "Human existence cannot be silent,
nor can it be nourished by false words, but only true words,
with which men transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to
name the world, to change it" (76). With this, writing and
activism coalesce and, for me that semester in that class, to
conceive of writing – that thing I had been doing since the
first grade, that thing that had become, unfortunately, simply
an exercise in, returning to Linda Brodkey, "knowing and

following the rules" in the time since, and that thing I had for so very long looked upon, when done for "me" rather than for a grade, as something I did simply to *escape* from the world – as being the tool of, taking a still-favorite saying of mine from Freire's *The Politics of Educaiton*, "becoming, in order to be" (137) was something that, to put it simply, blew my mind.

And with these treaties from Cixous and Lessing and Freire and others – reading them, writing about them, talking about them – "uncertainty," its potential and even its revolutionary promise, was laid bare for me that semester in the course. I took those philosophies about writing and thinking and thinking about writing that were introduced to me in that semester and they opened my eyes and inspired me, as they still do today. It was an unforgettable semester that Fall in this class and, when it was done, I had not only been converted to the Mysteries of "Uncertainty" but prepared to spread its gospel out in the world, striding to "Write with Uncertainty" instead of "Onward Christian Soldiers." As I said, it was the very next term that I wrote my Master's thesis, "To Write with Wonder," with this professor as its second reader actually. Looking back at thesis now, I am proud of what I accomplished with it and I do feel there is a lot "good" there. It was impassioned and engrossed and curious and hopeful. However, it was also, in too many ways, naïve and, ironically, too, too *certain* about

"uncertainty." But when it was finished and validated with the signatures of my committee, I had my M. A. But months later, I was beginning my first year as a Ph.D. student in English at SUNY-Stony Brook. When asked the focus of my studies, my "specialty," I was happy to declare myself a "compositionist," identifying myself as a part of the field as if a member of some riotous counter-culture punk rock band like the MC5 or Discharge or Rage Against the Machine. I was happy to expound my philosophy of "Uncertainty" and insinuate it whenever and wherever I could, possibly obnoxiously so.

After leaving Montclair State and starting my doctoral work at SUNY-Stony Brook, it was my fierce belief that the pursuit of uncertainty and conflict in writing leads to the fostering of inquiry and critical thought. While I had yet to really understand *how* this uncertainty and conflict were roused, *how* they were "operationalized," outside of theoretical discussions and within actual academic contexts, settings of real-world education, there was very little doubt about their potential to further and to deepen thinking and writing.

It was around this same time that I was introduced to the now-prominent research study conducted by William Perry at Harvard, begun in 1953 and finally published in 1968, under the title *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*, which seemed to "prove" my convictions.

This study done by Perry and Harvard's Bureau of Study Council examined "an evolution in students' interpretation of their lives evident in their accounts of their experiences during four years in a liberal arts college" (1), which represented "a coherent development in the forms in which they functioned intellectually, in the forms in which they experienced values and the forms in which they construed their world" (11). Out of this, Perry and his research group determined that this "evolution," "a common sequence of challenges" (11), took the form of a unidirectional movement along a developmental scheme made up of nine distinct stages, from a basic and elementary consciousness – one of perceiving the world "in polar terms of we-right-good vs. other-wrong-bad" (13) and "knowledge and goodness [as] quantitative accretions of discrete rightness to be collected by hard work and obedience" (13) – to a more, if not most, thoroughly evolved stage, in which a student "experiences the affirmation of identity among multiple responsibilities and realizes Commitment as an ongoing, unfolding activity through which he expresses his life style" (15), thus embodying an ultimate state of what Perry called "relativistic pragmatism," something, in terms of its purpose towards the democratization and further humanization of society, remarkably similar to Schor's "critical consciousness" (after Freire's "critical reflection").

After the study was finished, Perry wrote that he had observed that it was a confrontation with new and problematic experiences, which were "anomalous and contradictory" (149) and which pushed students to "'face up' to limits, uncertainties, and the dissolution of established beliefs" (73), was the impetus, the cause and catalyst, for this "evolution," or "revolutionary restructuring" (149), "critical thinking" thus becoming habitual, the rule for perceiving reality and experience rather than the exception, reserved for particular classes and the assignments therein. Furthermore, he elaborated that the influence and potential of such epistemological conflicts had manifested itself in the development of a student's capacity to "conceptualize about concepts, to think about his thoughts" (45): "The characteristic of the liberal arts education of today [...] is its demand for a sophistication about one's own line of reasoning as contrasted with other possible lines of reasoning. In short, it demands meta-thinking" (45).

While Perry had concluded that this "evolution" within students' thinking through thinking *about* their thinking was an almost natural byproduct of a "liberal arts education" and the "diversity" offered therein, I still had questions. Does that conflict with the "anomalous and contradictory" that instigates the engendering of Perry's "relativistic pragmatism" simply

occur *because* of the nature of a "liberal arts education"? Does

such an "evolution" just happen *because* of the simple presence

and proximity of diversity? Although Perry had attested to the

almost "cause and effect" nature of those relationships, he had

not claimed that their outcome, that "relativism" of his, was

something easy to bring about. In the very same way, then, was

that potential and promise of "writing with uncertainty" for

which I had sung the praises like a devout missionary out to

save the world and for which Perry's findings had become useful

explanation and evidence so very easy to realize as well? No.

It simply was not. And something I would come to understand, in

time, was that, while it was very difficult to fulfill them, it

was actually very easy, all too easy, to hinder and even betray

them.

Those questions confronted me with more frequency and with

more insistence while I was working towards my Ph.D. at Stony

Brook. They were born out of experiences in the writing

classroom that laid bare to me something altogether different

happening beneath all that talk of Uncertainty. Zealous efforts

to promote that questioning, Uncertainty-raising philosophy of

not simply writing but even of life turned into an unknowing

dissemination of a certain and, to some degree, authoritative

perspective of reality and "truth." Discourse that offered

disparate and contrary perspectives stifled, ironically, out of

a vehement belief in "writing with Uncertainty." Questioning

and overtures towards Uncertainty adopted as rhetorical devices

simply to satisfy and to earn approval instead of as textual

manifestations of a "relativistic" perceiving of the world and

those living in it. Taken as a whole, those experiences would

come to stand for me as examples of the very fine line between

education and indoctrination. What I witnessed with them, in

all their threat and contempt, was the privileging, the proving,

the promotion of the *Certainty* of Uncertainty. And because of

it, that potential and that promise remained, unfortunately,

unknown.

 After some time had passed, I found myself asking, "Was

this what it really meant to 'write with uncertainty'"? What

had happened? And what meaning was I to make of it all? What I

had experienced was not only confusing but also disappointing.

A good deal of what I had thought I would find with bringing

Uncertainty to the teaching of writing had been contradicted. I

do not want to sound overdramatic, but, to put things simply, I

was disheartened. This was many years ago now. And as they

say, with time comes perspective, which I am, now, *very* grateful

for. Taking that proverbial long, hard look back at those

experiences, back at my Master's thesis, back at Bob's

"Rhetorical Theory and the Teaching of Writing" class, I began

to see things with some clarity. In my rebellious passion to

redeem writing from languishing as nothing but those same

"ritual performances of penmanship, spelling, grammar,

punctuation, organization, and […] thinking" it had been for me

and return that spirit of "wonder" to writing, I had made a

veritable false idol of "uncertainty" and a straw man of

"certainty." And the results of such a thing, for me, were

plain to see with those experiences. The privileging of

"uncertainty" had been pushed to such a degree that it had been

translated, through actual classroom practice, into "certainty."

It was almost like putting so much weight on one side of a

hanging scale that is causes the apparatus to flip over onto

itself. I had been so damned certain about the transformative

potential of "uncertainty" – intellectually, culturally,

socially – and, conversely, the ills and offences of

"certainty," that, unfortunately, I did not see this happening

in front of my theory-blinded eyes.

    Because of this, writing students had been handed

"uncertainty" in a preconceived and prefabricated fashion,

similar to the "bricks" of knowledge handed to students in those

settings of non-socially reformative education heavily critiqued

by revolutionary educational theorist John Dewey. I had been

introduced to Dewey's work while I was at Montclair State, but

it was not until sometime later, after those experiences of mine

at Stony Brook, that I began to see the true significance of his

philosophies of teaching. In his book *How We Think*, Dewey

referred to his notion of critical thought and authentic inquiry

as "reflective thinking," which he defined as: "Active,

persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supported

form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it,

and the further conclusions to which it tends" (6). For him,

the origins of such "reflective thinking" was with "perplexity,"

which he saw represented by the image of a "man traveling in an

unfamiliar region com[ing] to a branching of the roads":

"Having no sure knowledge to fall back upon, he is brought to a

standstill of hesitation and suspense. Which road is right?

And how shall perplexity be resolved?" (10). About the meaning

of this metaphor to "reflective thought," Dewey wrote:

> Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a
> *forked-road* situation, a situation that is ambiguous,
> that presents a dilemma, that proposes alternatives.
> […] One can think reflectively only when one is
> willing to endure suspense and to undergo the trouble
> of searching. […] To be genuinely thoughtful, we
> must be willing to sustain and protract that state of
> doubt which is the stimulus to thorough inquiry.
> (11)

To Dewey, for students to develop this "reflective thinking,"

teachers must introduce a classroom where their students

experience moments of "perplexity" for themselves and on their

own terms. To do otherwise for Dewey was contrary not only to

education but thinking as a whole. Again, it was to hand

students "bricks" of thinking that had already been thought.

While possibly not without exception, the students amidst those

experiences I'd had in the writing classroom had been handed

veritable "bricks" of "uncertainty" rather than experiencing it,

experiencing Dewey's "perplexity," on their own, with their own

writing, for their own lives.

"Uncertainty" had been valorized and "certainty" had been

villanized and what came of this was, to say the least,

unfortunate. It was an utter faith in "uncertainty" that had

allowed it to become turned into something palpably *certain*.

Because of this, the potential and promise of "Uncertainty" as

heralded by Cixous, Lessing, Freire, Perry, and others – even

myself – was lost in the translation, vanishing into the wind

like a forgotten dream. And I should have known better than to

situate them in an extremely polarized "either/or" scenario

within my perception of things and then cast my attentions upon

only one of them, because "uncertainty" cannot be separated from

"certainty" without repercussions. But one half of the whole is

incomplete. This was something I should have known because of

the impression and influence that prominent composition theorist

and "process" forefather Peter Elbow, in particular his book

Embracing Contraries, had had on me when I was working towards

my Master's – and still does, perhaps more than anyone else in

the field. But as was the case with Dewey, while I had read

Elbow's theories of writing and the teaching of writing, it

would seem that I hadn't really *learned* from them, at least not

until sometime later - after confronting those experiences in

the writing classroom and having to confront the questions they

had left me with. At the heart of the issue behind Elbow's

book's very title is what Elbow called "cooking," the "process

of one piece of material (or one process) being transformed by

interacting with another: one piece of material being seen

through the lens of another, being dragged through the guts of

another, being reoriented in terms of the other, being mapped

onto the other" (40-1). For him, this dialectical "cooking"

served a very crucial purpose for not only writing but thinking

as well:

> Searching for contradiction and affirming both sides
> can allow you to find both the limitations of the
> system in which you are working and a way to break
> out of it. If you find contradictions and try too
> quickly to get rid of them, you are only neatening
> up, even straightening, the system you are in. To
> actually get beyond that system you need to find the
> deepest contradictions and, instead of trying to
> reconcile them, heighten them by affirming both
> sides. And if you can nurture the contradictions
> cleverly enough, you can be led to a new system with
> a wider frame of reference, one that includes the two
> new elements which were felt as contradictory in the
> old frame of reference. (241)

With this, Elbow was establishing a dialectic that was extremely

dialogic, an interaction that was extremely dualistic, wherein

the potential of each contrary can only be realized out of the

extreme implementation of the other. It was an "and/or"-ness

that allows the whole process to be something it would not have

otherwise been. For Elbow, to not "cook" was to do merely one

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and not the other. To not "cook" was to have the same old thing

– perceptions, thoughts, words – all over again. As he wrote:

> Good learning is not a matter of finding a happy
> medium where both parties are transformed as little
> as possible. Rather both parties must be maximally
> transformed – in a sense deformed. There is violence
> in learning. We cannot learn something without
> eating it, yet we cannot really learn it either
> without being chewed up. (148)

And when Elbow's "cooking" is brought to the "contraries" of

"uncertainty" and "certainty," what exists is not an "either/or"

situation but a deep and extreme "both/and":

> My claim […] is that methodological doubt is only
> half of what we need. Yes, we need the systematic,
> disciplined, and conscious attempt to criticize
> everything no matter how compelling it might seem –
> to find flaws or contradictions we might otherwise
> miss. But thinking is not trustworthy unless it also
> includes methodological belief: the equally
> systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to
> believe everything no matter how unlikely or
> repellent it might seem – to find virtues or
> strengths we might otherwise miss. (257)

For Elbow, what it came down to was a matter of the "systematic,

disciplined, and conscious" engendering of a dialectic, contrary

and contradictory ways of seeing and thinking – and writing.

All of this said, however, before I explore that dialectic

further, I want to examine those zealous "either/or"

privilegings of Certainty and Uncertainty to which it would

exist as a release – a remedy. I will begin with the former for

the simple reason of chronology. The worship of Certainty, as a

veritable god, extends back to not simply the beginnings of

human civilization but, according to John Dewey, the very

beginnings of humanity itself. In this way, it is a perspective

upon reality and "truth," or a tendency towards it, that appears

to be an almost "natural" aspect of human consciousness, its

roots having woven themselves through Western religion, Western

science, and even Western politics. Because of this, however,

it is that much more difficult to redress. But awareness, as

they say, is the first step.

II.

When I was studying for my general exams some years ago, one of the three reading lists came out of an independent study I had taken during the first year of my Ph.D. course work. It was comprised of the original texts of those 18th and 19th Century rhetoricians such as George Campbell, Hugh Blair, Richard Whatley, Henry Noble Day, John Franklin, Genung, and others whose work was the foundation of what would come to be referred to – almost like a string of curse words in the years since Richard Young, after Daniel Fogarty in 1959, put it out into the common parlance of compositionists in his 1979 essay, "Paradigms and Problems: Needed Research in Rhetorical Invention" – as "Current-Traditional Rhetoric." At the time, I was asked, very sincerely, "What is there for you?" It is a good question that still needs to be asked, as I am returning, here and now, to those dusty and time-worn volumes of 19th Century British and American rhetoric yet again. What *am* I so very interested in them?

I cannot say that those 18th and 19th Century rhetorical text++s were, or are, a "pleasure" to read, or that any of them, by themselves, are exactly "memorable." They are dull and dry and derivative and so very dated. As the 1800s unfolded, those rhetorics offered less and less philosophical or theoretical

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conversation and, in its place, page after stiff, strict page of prescriptive "Dos and Don'ts" – and a lot more of the latter than the former, or so it seemed to me. They offered no explanation of *why* you should follow the rhetorical advice collected within them except, simply, that theirs was the way things should be done if a writer is to write *properly*: within the boundaries of social propriety. In the end, while I may have examined them, I cannot say I truly read them, because, in many ways, they were not really meant to be "read" but ingested, as you would a vaccine against some foreign illness.

A possible exception is George Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, the book for which the Scottish reverend has become most well-known within the history of rhetoric. It first saw print in 1776 and I have always found that publication date to be ironic, as this seminal work from one of the "founding fathers" of Current-Traditional Rhetoric came out the same year those New World colonies of the British Empire became the "United States" and declared themselves an independent nation. This confluence may be a simple coincidence, but, regardless, it stands as an example of something I have been extremely curious about these past few years: those "dots" throughout the different layers of 19th Century American culture waiting to be connected and traced down, eventually, to rhetoric: how we write, when we write, why we write. And it is indeed that

convergence that has stoked my interest about the textual
"roots" of Current-Traditional Rhetoric and brought me back to
them again and again, despite the somewhat disagreeable nature
of those texts themselves.

When I take a proverbial "step back" from those 18th and 19th
Century rhetorics and examine them as situated within
increasingly greater cultural and social contexts throughout the
whole milieu of those still-juvenile "United States of America,"
from education to industry to medicine to science to religion,
they are at the heart of the whole thing. Because of this,
rhetoric in 19th Century America, the theories and practices of
writing and the teaching of writing that would, in time, go on
to become that "Current-Traditional Rhetoric," would seem to
exist as an artifact, evidence from the past testifying to the
atmosphere of the world, or worlds, outside of the American
writing classroom of the day. And it would seem that,
throughout the 1800s, this "atmosphere" was one heavy with
tumultuous change within many facets of the American experience.
According to Robert Connors in his book *Composition-Rhetoric*,
the exact nature of Current-Traditional Rhetoric, or
"composition-rhetoric" as he chose to refer it, was born out of
"very deep cultural changes in nineteenth-century America" (24).
On how those changes affected the changes that would happen for
rhetoric itself, he writes:

> [W]hat happened to rhetoric in American colleges
> between 1820 and 1900 is, in the realm of that
> discipline, remarkable: a 2,500-year-old
> intellectual tradition adopts an almost completely
> new base of theory, a variety of novel pedagogies, an
> almost completely changed audience and constituency,
> and a wholly new cultural status in less than eighty
> years. Certainly other disciplines changed, grew,
> were refined during the nineteenth century, but none
> so startlingly or so thoroughly. Surely great
> changes must have occurred in more than just the
> discipline in order to cause such a tremendous shift.

Doctor Erwin Ackerknecht, medical historian and author of *A Short History of Medicine*, attempts to explain those "very deep cultural changes" of Connors:

> The United States was a new country; yet its roots
> were firmly grounded in an older civilization. It
> was faced with the problem of assimilating as rapidly
> as possible the attainments of the mother-countries
> of Europe. Consequently, the problem of education
> and educational standards – of the adequate
> transmission of the best existing knowledge – was of
> prime importance in the [this] formative period.
> (218)

Although Ackerknecht was writing with medicine in mind, his meaning applies nonetheless to rhetoric. America was a nation that was still in its veritable infancy when compared to its Western forebears across the cold Atlantic, in particular England, its former sovereign. It was trying to not simply assert its own identity on the world stage, but, more critically, ascertain what exactly that "American identity" would be – should be – here at home. America was desperately trying to define itself. Out of that, boundaries were being drawn and redrawn, narrowing further and further what was perceived as the "truth" of the world, of reality, and this new

country's place in it all. And it came down to America's

schools, much more specifically, to rhetoric – to the writing

classes for America's youth, whether those in secondary school

or the newly college-institutionalized courses in freshman

composition – to serve as a standardizing "filter" in the

service of the dogma and dicta, conscious or not, of those

extracurricular forces striving to control the "fate" of the

country: again, religion, science, medicine, politics,

economics and industry. For James Berlin in *Writing Instruction*

in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges, rhetoric, as it was

popularly translated in writing classes throughout America in

the 19th century, acted as a "gatekeeper." Discussing the

ascendancy of usage, grammar, and "correctness" in the writing

classrooms of the 1800s, Berlin writes:

> The mark of the educated was now the use of a certain
> version of the native language, a version that tended
> to coincide with the dialect of the upper middle
> class, the group that had customarily attended
> college. Children of the lower orders were now asked
> to prove their worthiness for a place in the upper
> ranks of society – now defined by profession as well
> as income – by learning this dialect. Composition
> teachers became the caretakers of the English tongue,
> and more important, the gatekeepers on the road to
> good things in life, as defined by the professional
> class. (72)

And on the rhetorical system in which such "correct" grammar was

integral, Berlin continues:

> The best that can be said of this model is that
> students were indeed writing. The worst that can be
> said is that this model severely restricts the
> student's response to experience. Current-
> traditional rhetoric dictates that certain matters

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cannot be discussed because they are either illusory
[…] or they cannot be contained within acceptable
structures […]. This very exclusion, meanwhile,
encourages a mode of behavior that helps students in
their move up the corporate ladder – correctness in
usage, grammar, clothing, thought, and a certain
sterile objectivity and disinterestedness. (74-5)

Similar to Berlin, composition scholar Sharon Crowley also wrote
about the 19th-Century "roots" of Current-Traditional Rhetoric in
her book *The Methodical Memory*. Late in her work, she offers an
estimation of that unspoken campaign for socialization for which
writing was used throughout American education in the 1800s and
much of the next century as well that is more scathing than
Berlin's:

[L]ate nineteenth-century attempts to
standardize composition instruction may have sprung
from motives other than that of relieving composition
teachers from some of the burden of paper grading.
[L]anguage arts instruction was efficiently (because
silently) geared to include those whose manners and
class it reflected. Those whose manners were not
middle-class either adapted or were excluded.
[…]
The formal standards […] imposed on student
writers reflected ethical and social values fully as
much as intellectual ones. A discourse marked by
unity, coherence, and emphasis, stringently
construed, would of necessity reflect a strong sense
of limitations, of what was possible, as well as a
grasp of the proper relations of things in the
universe. (137-8)

What we have here, as Connors, Berlin, and Crowley have
observed, is rhetoric, in the form of those courses in freshman
composition new to American colleges and universities of the
1800s, becoming deluged by different streams of social and
cultural pressure – and *adapting* to it. To put things simply,
American society got what it had been asking for with the

flourishing of Current-Traditional Rhetoric in the late 19th and 20th century. And through that convergence of influence upon the head of rhetoric, what emerged was the teaching not so much of a way to "write" but a way to *think*: a way to perceive and conceive phenomena, "reality" and "truth," in a very particular way, one stamped with the deepest philosophies and principles of Western culture. And for me, the aenima that roused and drove that "nesting doll" whose portrait I had tried to paint earlier – that convergence of broader social and cultural influences that goaded, as Connors said it before, "a 2,500-year-old intellectual tradition [to adopt] an almost completely new base of theory, a variety of novel pedagogies, an almost completely changed audience and constituency, and a wholly new cultural status in less than eighty years" – was Certainty.

What has brought me back to the 19th century, then, is Certainty: an almost wholesale pursuit and perpetuation of certainty that defined American culture and society and, with it, what became known to composition scholars like Crowley, Berlin, and Connors as "Current-Traditional Rhetoric." Certainty, a way of seeing the "truth" of the world and reality in terms of, as William Perry had explained it very explicitly, the "polar terms of we-right-good vs. other-wrong-bad" through ignoring the contradictory, the foreign, and the unknown, was needed by the different spheres of those burgeoning United

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States of America in the 1800s for their own different ends but, as a whole, in order to not simply render the young nation competitive with the European powers but *stronger* than them. And, curiously, they would all seem to find rhetoric, something as seemingly small and simple as "writing," to assure this end.

But before I go any further with this examination, I must stop for a confession. I am well aware of the phrase, "Correlation does not imply causation," so commonly used in the sciences and statistics. Because of that, I know that certainty in religion or certainty in science and medicine does not so very simply "equal" certainty in rhetoric, even despite the fact that some of the earliest authors of those pre-"Current-Traditional Rhetoric" texts, such as George Campbell, were reverends who composed their treatises in order to help young clergymen to write effective sermons or the fact that many 19th-Century rhetoricians, such as Alexander Bain, strove to produce a "scientistic" rhetoric, as Berlin referred to it, by approximating the empirical method of chemistry or physics. That said, however, those then-contemporary social and cultural changes spreading out from different corners of 19th-Century America are too conspicuous not to see the huge impact the singular zeitgeist that they stirred would have upon rhetoric. My return to the 19th century and the Current-Traditional Rhetoric that saw its birth there is by no means setting out to

be an exhaustive investigation like those offered by Sharon

Crowley, Robert Connors, or the oft-referenced Albert Kitzhaber

and I have no pretentious of trying to rival them, or their

efforts. I want simply to try to explore further those

connections I believe I have seen between those cultural and

social "causes" and that rhetorical "effect" and try to explain

what they mean. With all of this said, then, I would leave the

present day and travel back through these many years to the 19th

century yet again and examine, briefly, how certainty – an urge

to embody it, an urge to engender it – was exhibited by the most

powerful of cultural influences in America at the time and then,

with such a backdrop laid out, how their convergence transformed

rhetoric into a tool for the continuation of certainty.

   But before I set out on this return exploration of the 19th

century, I want to establish further what that call for

certainty is all *about* in the end. What does certainty "do" for

those in, sometimes desperate, search of it? What does it

serve, whether psychologically or spiritually? To John Dewey,

the need for certainty is one of humanity's very oldest and

deepest emotions. The basic purpose of Dewey's *The Quest for

Certainty*, a collection of lectures he had delivered at the

University of Edinburgh in 1929, was to explore and explain the

divorce of philosophy from practice, or, as he put it in the

book, the "historic grounds for the elevation of knowledge above

making and doing" (6). And for Dewey, who promoted his

"reflective thought" for wholly pragmatic ends, the root of this

"exaltation of pure intellect and its activity above practical

affairs" (6) was a search for, as his book's title suggests,

certainty – "a certainty which shall be absolute and

unshakeable" (6). This "quest" of Dewey's hearkens back to the

dawn of humanity, when our ancestors tried to explain what they

witnessed up in the blue sky of day over them, as well as all

that was unseen and unknown in the black shadows of the night.

Of such a primordial time, Dewey offers the following glimpse:

> [M]ystery attended experiences of good and evil; they
> could not be traced to their natural causes and they
> seemed to be the dispensations, the gifts and the
> inflictions, of powers beyond possibility of control.
> The precarious crises of birth, puberty, illness,
> death, war, famine, plague, the uncertainties of the
> hunt, the vicissitudes of climate and the great
> seasonal changes, kept imagination occupied with the
> uncertain. (10)

In the end, that search for certainty was – and still is – a

search for stability and safety in the face of ubiquitous

uncertainty. It is, as Dewey writes, "a quest for a peace which

is assured, an object which is unqualified by risk and the

shadow of fear which action casts. For it is not uncertainty

per se which men dislike, but the fact that uncertainty involves

us in peril of evils" (8). Because of profound fear of the

mysterious architecture of the universe, humans sought to

confine and control natural phenomena. And to Dewey, the only

way this could be done was through abstractions, in the world of

thought. In those earliest chapters of humanity as well as

still today, if only subconsciously, it was believed that it was

not through the flesh but through the mind and the soul that

humans could commune with their gods. Of this, Dewey writes:

> The intellect, however, according to the traditional
> doctrine, may grasp universal Being, and Being which
> is universal is fixed and immutable. [...] Man's
> distrust of himself has caused him to desire to get
> beyond and above himself; in pure knowledge he has
> thought he could attain this self-transcendence. (7)

In short, by approaching certainty, man approached the gods or

the universal "Truth," or "Being" as Dewey put it. And by

approaching the gods, man became *like* the gods, a Master of

Reality, or so his ego assured him. Certainty guaranteed the

static nature of the reality or "truth" of the world, and

humanity's place in it. Such utter changelessness of the

universe was perceived to be an almost godly ordained thing, as,

according to Dewey:

> If a thing changes, its alteration is convincing
> evidence of its lack of true or complete Being. What
> *is*, in the full and pregnant sense of the word, is
> always, eternally. It is self-contradictory for that
> which *is* to alter. If it had no defect or
> imperfection in it how could it change? (19)

And this certainty-exalting "Universal Being" of Dewey's would

seem to indeed be unchanging, at least in a sense, as it, and

the "quest" for it, seems to have pervaded human civilization

well into "modern" times. It took the form of the nature-

incarnated gods of earliest man. It took the form of the sun

illuminating the eyes of the unshackled prisoner in Plato's

"Allegory of the Cave." It took the form of the "God" of the

prophets and preachers of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition.

It took the form of the mathematical laws of the cosmos

postulated by René Descartes and, later, Sir Isaac Newton. As

Dewey explains it:

> The belief that the divine encompasses the world was
> detached from its mythical context and made the basis
> of philosophy, and it became also the foundation of
> physical science - as is suggested by the remark that
> the heavenly bodies are gods. Telling the story of
> the universe in the form of rational discourse
> instead of emotionalized imagination signified the
> discovery of logic as a rational science. Conformity
> on the part of supreme reality to the requirements of
> logic conferred upon its constitutive objects
> necessary and immutable characteristics. Pure
> contemplation of these forms was man's highest and
> most divine bliss, a communion with unchangeable
> truth. (15)

It is no exaggeration, then, when Dewey declares in his book

that "[t]he quest for certitude has determined our basic

metaphysics" (22).

Again: certainty. Whether in the purview of religion or

science or whatever other undertaking of human society,

certainty is sought out because it would seem to promise not

simply peace and control, or at the very least a reassuring

semblance of them, but also, very well more crucially, an

alignment with a "Truth" – "fixed and immutable," "absolute and

unshakeable" – written across the universe. And a pursuit of

certainty necessitates a very particular perspective of the

world and humanity's ultimate place and purpose therein. It is

a perspective of reality and "truth" that is extremely bipolar

because it sees natural phenomena and the knowledge amassed about it in the simple "black or white" terms. It is a perspective that is authoritarian because it only conceives of things in terms of "true or false," "right or wrong," "good or evil," and so on. It is a perspective that is severely conservative because the essential natures of those polarized contraries do not change, nor does the distance between them. Because of all of this, then, anything that is foreign, anomalous, or simply irresolute – anything that is *un*certain – is either ignored or denounced. And those realities or "truths" that would willfully transgress against a status quo perspective are deemed blasphemous. To put things simply, there is no "both/and" of Peter Elbow's in such a thusly constructed world: only a resounding "either/or."

It is not difficult to see the translation of this search for certainty and the fundamental demeanor of perceiving and conceiving it calls for in the traditions of what has been the most defining influence upon Western Culture for well over two-thousand years now: Christianity. A black or white perception of "truth" that is dogmatic because of its static nature and, thus, that offers safety through a semblance of a control of reality: it is all there with Christianity – at the very least, Christianity of a very orthodox sort. But before I go any further, however, I want to make something very clear: this is

not a denigration of Christianity, or of Christians. No. It is

simply an examination of a cultural epistemology that may, in

the end, be "critical" but not underhandedly so, regardless of

that fact that, while I was raised a Christian, I am today an

atheist – or, on a "good" day, an agnostic. Regardless, any

investigation into the social and cultural influences upon 19th-

Century rhetoric is sadly incomplete without looking at the

profound debt that Christianity is owed by Western thought. As

cultural historian Richard Tarnas contends: "Even now, in less

obvious but not less significant ways, the Christian world view

still affects – indeed permeates – the Western cultural psyche,

even when the latter is most apparently secular in disposition"

(91). With that said, I will follow Tarnas' exploration of

Christianity's origins and heritage, as spread out in his book

The Passion of the Western Mind, to acknowledge my own debt to

him in terms of my understanding of the epistemological nature

of Christianity and its influence upon Western rhetorical

thought and practice.

    Tarnas contends that Christianity's capacity to mold the

"Western cultural psyche" like so much wet clay is because of

its roots in Judaism and the philosophic tradition of the

Greeks. While the former is somewhat obvious, something made

very apparent with a simple turning of a Bible's pages from the

"Old" to the "New" Testament, it is the latter that is, for me,

a fascinating thing because it insinuates Christianity into the

heart of Western rhetoric. But about the former, it would seem

that the most crucial inheritance for Christianity from Judaism

was monotheism. For those Hebrews of the pre-Christian era,

monotheism was not simply a – if not *the* – defining

characteristics of their religion, identifying them as the

"Chosen People" of God, but also of the way they perceived

reality, as theology and history were, as Tarnas describes it,

"inextricably conjoined." Of that monotheistic nature of

traditional Judaism, Tarnas writes:

> In the midst of a land where a multiplicity of nature
> deities were worshipped by surrounding tribes and
> nations, the Hebrews came to believe they existed in
> a unique and direct relationship to the one absolute
> God who stood above and beyond all other beings as
> both creator of the world and director of its
> history. Indeed, the Hebrews perceived their own
> history as continuous with and reflective of the very
> beginnings of Creation, when God had made the world
> and, in his own image, man. (94)

The "one absolute God" of the early Hebrews "was not one tribal

or polis deity among many, but was the one true supreme God –

the Maker of the universe, the Lord of history, the omnipotent

and omniscient King of Kings whose unequalled reality and power

justly commanded the allegiance of all nations and all mankind"

(97). Put simply, everything in this material life has been

preordained, and prescribed, by a "truth" glorified through the

covenant with this "one absolute God," this "one true supreme

God." It is a "truth" that was portrayed in sheer, and often

severe, black or white: either follow the word of God or don't, which separates those who are good from those who are evil, or at the very least not "good," which itself separates, in the end, those who will be saved at the End of Days from those who won't. In the end, then, this monotheistic belief, if zealously obeyed, becomes tantamount to blinders, or, at the very worst, chains. According to the perception of "truth" that it both necessitated and nurtured, there are but two roads to walk down throughout this mortal existence. You listen and learn and live by that "supreme" and "absolute" word of God and you go to Heaven. *Or else*. And for Tarnas, the real possibilities for this sort of epistemological myopia that Judaic monotheism had bred were amplified as that God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was translated into the terms of earliest Christianity at the dawn of the "A.D." epoch, or the so-called "Common Era." But it would seem that a crucial reason for such an intensification can be traced to the influence of Greek philosophy upon the roots of Christianity, a relationship I would never have suspected, as I said before.

While Christianity owes its "Old Testament"-displayed history and culture to Judaism, Tarnas claims that it was in fact the traditions of Greece where the authoritative and static nature of Christianity can truly be found. He writes, "While Christianity's claim to religious universality originated in

Judaism, both its effective universality – its success in propagation – and its philosophical universality owed much to the Greco-Roman milieu of its birth" (98). About this, he further explains:

> [The] Christian world view was fundamentally informed by its classical predecessors. Not only did there exist crucial parallels between the tenets and rituals of Christianity and those of the pagan mystery religions, but in addition, as time passed, even the most erudite elements of Hellenic philosophy were absorbed by, and had their influence on, Christian faith. (100)

And one of the most critical of those "erudite elements" of Greek philosophy which Tarnas refers to which defined Christianity's fundamental perception of reality and "truth" as a way of testifying to the certainty of the word of God was in fact "Logos," something that roots the then still-infant religion, very curiously for me, in the realm of rhetoric. Along with Ethos and Pathos, Logos was one of the three "modes of persuasion" of classical rhetoric as expounded by Aristotle in *Rhetoric*, his seminal fourth century B.C.E.-treatise on the titular subject. Defining rhetoric as the "faculty of observing in any given case, the available means of persuasion" (2155), while Ethos had to do with the reputation of the would-be speaker or writer and Pathos had to do with the emotions of his or her intended audience, Logos was an appeal or proof based upon what Aristotle referred to as "the words of the speech itself" (2155), or, perhaps less abstractly put, the logical

reasoning behind those words. Early in her investigation of invention in Current-Traditional Rhetoric, *The Methodical Memory*, Sharon Crowley alludes to Logos during a discussion of the "topics" when she writes: "The topics […] were a set of argumentative strategies that were available to any trained rhetor. Since the topics represented common strategies for acquiring knowledge, the rhetor who employed them could be confident that an audience would immediately understand his procedure" (3). In essence, Logos was not simply knowledge – "knowledge as possessed in common by all members of a community" (4) as Crowley puts it, "communal knowledge" (162) – but the reasoning that orders that knowledge into a rational coherence. For Plato, who himself introduced a teenaged Aristotle to philosophical as well as rhetorical thought, Logos was not simply human reasoning or knowledge but some almost supernal Reason whose design was written upon the universe. As Plato's Socrates says to Glaucon in that Philosophy 101 favorite (and a staple reading from the freshman writing courses I have taught over the years), the so-called "Allegory of the Cave" from Book VII of his *The Republic*, Logos is "the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual" (208) and "the power upon which

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he who would act rationally, either in public or private life,

must have his eye fixed" (208).

And it was this same Logos, then, according to Tarnas –

reasoning, knowledge, and Reason – that became synonymous with

Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of those very early

Christians' "one true supreme God." Of this, Tarnas writes:

> Fundamental Platonic principles now found
> corroboration and new meaning in the Christian
> context[.][…] Despite its having entirely distinct
> origins from the Judeo-Christian religion, for many
> ancient Christian intellectuals the Platonic
> tradition was itself an authentic expression of
> divine wisdom, capable of bringing articulate
> metaphysical insight to some of the deepest Christian
> mysteries. Thus as Christian culture matured during
> its first several centuries, its religious thought
> developed into a systematic theology, and although
> that theology was Judeo-Christian in substance, its
> metaphysical structure was largely Platonic. (102)

Further exposing that transformation of the theory of the Logos

of Greek philosophical thought into the body and blood of the

Jesus of Nazareth of the Christian religion, he continues to

explain that, while the former helped offer meaning to the

latter for those early Christians, the reverse was also the case

for those existing in what he refers to as the "Hellenistic

cultural world":

> In their understanding of Christ as the incarnate
> Logos, early Christian theologians synthesized the
> Greek philosophical doctrine of the intelligible
> divine rationality of the world with the Judaic
> religious doctrine of the creative Word of God, which
> manifested a personal God's providential will and
> gave to human history its salvational meaning. In
> Christ, the Logos became man; the historical and the
> timeless, the absolute and the personal, the human
> and the divine became one. Through his redemptive
> act, Christ mediated the soul's access to the

transcendent reality and thus satisfied the
philosopher's ultimate quest. In terms strongly
reminiscent of Platonism with its transcendent Ideas,
Christian theologians taught that to discover Christ
was to discover the truth of the cosmos and the truth
of one's own being in one unitary illumination.
(102)

Tarnas summarizes the phenomenon with a metaphor I offered

myself but a little earlier: "That supreme Light, the true

source of reality shining forth outside Plato's cave of shadows,

was now recognized as the light of Christ" (103). In short,

then, because of this same transubstantiation, as it were, Jesus

Christ, the living and returned Word of God, thus had become

knowledge, not simply "communal" but universal. Jesus Christ

had become not only reason but Reason, offering coherence and

order to all things in this world and, again, the next. Because

of all of this, Jesus Christ had become, perhaps most crucially

of all, Certainty made flesh: undeniable and unending.

     Because of that twofold influence, the Hebrew influence of

monotheism and the Greek influence of Logos, Christianity was

cast as not simply one definition of reality and "truth" among

others but *the* definition of reality and "truth." It was the

ecclesiastical declaration of a Reality and Truth that were

"fixed and immutable," "absolute and unshakeable," as John Dewey

had put it before. The effect of such a thing, Tarnas contends,

was epochal:

          The narratives and descriptions of divine reality and
          divine beings, that which had been myth in the pagan
          era – malleable, undogmatic, open to imaginative

> novelty and creative transformation, subject to
> conflicting versions and multiple interpretations –
> were now characteristically understood as absolute,
> historical, and literal truths, and every effort was
> made to clarify and systemize those truths into
> unchanging doctrinal formulae. In contrast to the
> pagan deities, whose characters tended to be
> intrinsically ambiguous – both good and evil, Janus-
> faced, variable according to context – the new
> Christian figures, in official doctrine at least,
> possessed no such ambiguity and maintained solid
> characters definitely aligned with good or evil.
> (111)

And about this circumscription of the possibilities for seeing

and thinking, leaving behind but a severely polarized "good or

evil" way of perceiving the world, Tarnas continues:

> There were not many true paths, nor many gods and
> goddesses differing from one place to the next and
> from one person to the next. There was but one God
> and one Providence, one true religion, one plan of
> salvation for the entire world. […] And so it was
> that the pluralism of classical culture, with its
> multiplicity of philosophies, its diversity of
> polytheistic mythologies, and its plethora of mystery
> religions, gave way to an emphatically monolithic
> system – one God, one Church, one Truth. (119)

The very basic result of this, then, was the rooting of

perceptions of "truth" and reality in certainty. Because of

Christianity's "unchanging doctrinal formulae," represented by

Tarnas' simple, and very apropos, equation of "one God, one

Church, one Truth," for those earliest Christians – and, very

possibly still for some uncountable flock of faithful almost two

millennia later – there was nothing but certainty. Because the

dogma of the new religion offered nothing that smelled of

"diversity" or "ambiguity" – its "true" doctrines was anything

but, as Tarnas wrote, "malleable, undogmatic, open to

imaginative novelty and creative transformation, subject to conflicting versions and multiple interpretations" – there was nothing "gray" to be found among them. There *could be* nothing "gray" to be found among them. In the epistemological schema that Christianity obliged, it was not that there was no space for the "anomalous and contradictory," the "ambiguous": all that is uncertain. It was that they were simply *not welcome*. As Dewey wrote, "If a thing changes, its alteration is convincing evidence of its lack of true or complete Being. […] If it had no defect or imperfection in it, how could it change?" (19). To contemplate uncertainty, even for a fleeting moment, is to doubt the "true or complete Being" of God, which is to doubt the universal and eternal Word of God incarnate in his son, Jesus Christ, which is to doubt God himself. To do this is to invite Satan, the Devil, into your thoughts and flirt with the fires of Hell. And you don't want to burn in Hell, do you? Needless to say, there could be nothing but certainty, "supreme" and "absolute," and perceptions of "truth" and reality were ordained thusly: again, "one God, one Church, one Truth." So that the certainty – the order, the control, the authority – of Christian thought and the sense of safety it offered followers could be preserved and perpetuated, the "unchanging doctrinal formulae" of Tarnas' had a very simple end product: "good or evil," "Heaven or Hell." It demanded an extremely "either/or,"

"black or white" perspective of natural phenomena, life, and the world, which, all too unfortunately, limited the possibilities of knowledge and "truth," but, for the faithful, there was little choice to be had, because, again, who wanted to burn in Hell? That said, however, it was a way of seeing and thinking that would have the deepest influence upon Western society and culture and the Western ideology that permeated them. Because of this, it was an epistemology that would have the deepest influence upon modern thought, including, as I said before and as I will try to exhibit in time, rhetoric.

And so stood the reign of Christianity and, through it, the reign of that static, unconditional, and universal certainty of the Word of God. For century after century following the death and later deification of Jesus Christ, it was *the* "Truth," spread by the Bible – and the sword. Although sects representing differing, and at times contradictory, strains of that Christian "truth" did proliferate, for reasons philosophical, geographical, and political, the fundamental doctrines of Christianity became further and further simplified and codified. This was exemplified by the "Nicene Creed," a veritable standardizing tool for "correct" belief that was the result of the 4th Century meeting of the first ecumenical council in Nicaea, Turkey. Because of such normalizing measures throughout the history of Christianity, the perceptions of

reality that the faithful were allowed became more and more

narrow.

In time, those who would try to further explore and explain

the workings of the universe, thus broadening those perceptions,

would be branded as heretics, and punished as such, because of

the threats they posed to that certainty of the Word of God.

This was the unfortunate case of those answering the call to

expand the borders of scientific knowledge. The all-too-curious

likes of Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo Galilei, Andreas Vesalius,

and other pioneering scientists like them tried – dared – to

look deeply into the "mystery" that Dewey had explained as

inciting that "quest for certainty" and, because of their

investigations into the unknown, or, at the very least, the "not

wholly known," they were persecuted by the true strength girding

the status quo of their day: the Christian Church, regardless

of denomination. Because "reality" and the natural phenomenon

that vivifies it – astronomical, physical, chemical, anatomical,

physiological, and even mental – were still strictly defined by

Christianity's "unchanging doctrinal formulae" of "one God, one

Church, one Truth," any deviation from, never mind any denial

of, that predictive and prescriptive way of perceiving the

universe, the world, and humanity's place in them both was

forbidden. Again, you were either a believer, a follower, of

that Word of God … or you weren't.

However, as time passed, science – scientific thought and scientific investigations – became more and more ubiquitous, especially as those once-dark corners of the globe became enlightened with the hope and promise of Christianity thanks to Western exploration, trade, missionary work, and colonization. And according to a common portrait of history, the twilight of that God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was brought about by the dawn of the new God of the microscope, the telescope, and the anatomist's table. While the West would indeed seem to have become more "secular," as Tarnas asserted before, after the "Scientific Revolution" that spread throughout Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries and then the "Industrial Revolution" of the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe and the United States and, thus, less and less ruled by that "unchanging doctrinal formulae" of Christianity, beneath such appearances, however, I believe those two social and cultural prime movers, Christianity and Science, were not, in the end, as different as they have been assumed to be. As Tarnas contends later in his book:

> The West had 'lost its faith' – and found a new one,
> in science and in man. But paradoxically, much of
> the Christian world view found continued life, albeit
> in often unrecognized forms, in the West's new
> secular outlook. […] The West's belief in itself as
> the most historically significant and favored culture
> echoed the Judeo-Christian theme of the Chosen
> People. The global expansion of Western culture as
> the best and most appropriate for all mankind
> represented a secular continuation of the Roman
> Catholic Church's self-concept as the one universal
> Church for all humanity. Modern civilization now
> replaced Christianity as the cultural norm and ideal

with which all other societies were to be compared,
                    and to which they were to be converted. (320-3)

Yes, the loosening of Christianity's apparent hold upon the

Western world without a doubt had theological consequences;

however, in terms of epistemology or even ideology, I do doubt

the severity of those consequences. For me, Science was not the

successor of that "Christian world view" but its *inheritor*,

because they both seem to have had the very same "god":

certainty. The certainty that Western Science sought out and

sought to cultivate was no less "absolute and unshakeable," no

less "supreme," than what was worshipped by the Christian Church

in the form of the Word of God and the resurrected living Logos

of Jesus Christ. This "scientific" certainty guaranteed the

same things: order, stability, authority, and control. It was

that certainty that allowed the new god Science to usher the

West unto "modernity" and almost every aspect of that "modern"

world of the West was affected by it. And rhetoric and what

would become known after the nineteenth century as "composition"

was no less influenced than any of the other so-called "social

sciences." The phenomenon that Robert Connors wrote wherein,

again, "a 2,500-year-old intellectual tradition adopts an almost

completely new base of theory, a variety of novel pedagogies, an

almost completely changed audience and constituency, and a

wholly new cultural status in less than eighty years" (24), was,

I believe, the natural result of an America whose perspective

had become, throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, defined by a very "scientific" strain of certainty. In Connors' 1983 article "Composition Studies and Science," he explored the question of "why all practitioners within the social sciences and composition studies in particular have wished to reach out to the natural sciences" (17). To begin to seek out some answers, he offered a quotation from "conservative" rhetorician Richard Weaver: "Physical science was beginning to change the face of the earth, and it was adding greatly to the wealth-producing machinery of mankind. It was very human for a group engaged in developing a body of knowledge to wish to hitch its wagon to that star" (17). Following Weaver's metaphor, Connors further explained such an "attraction":

> The immense romance of the natural sciences is very difficult for any of the social sciences to resist, and it is not unnatural that composition studies should feel a powerful attraction in that direction. […]
> Given the chaotic, anti-empirical, confused, and at times mindless history of the teaching of writing, it is not surprising to find that as we develop our body of knowledge we are tempted by the vast successes of the natural sciences. (17-8)

For Connors, those "natural sciences" offered the promise of what he called "universal scientific maturity" and, for the likes of composition, it stood as a solution to crises of credibility, utility, and even simple identity. But this answer in the form of science to such professional and cultural dilemmas would prove to be an all too unfortunate illusion. The

field of composition was not, as Connors saw it, a "rigorous

scientific discipline" and, because of that "fact," while it

could aspire to the same objectivity and universality, the same

certainty, that science would seem to engender, it could never

achieve them.

Although Connors' intention was to question the then (and

perhaps still) common use by composition scholars of Thomas

Kuhn's theories of the "paradigm" and its subsequent "shift"

from his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in the wake of

Maxine Hairston's renowned 1982 article for *College Composition

and Communication*, "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the

Revolution in the Teaching of Writing," I believe his article

has a good deal of significance for an understanding of the

influence that those "natural sciences" had upon rhetoric well

more than a hundred years before either Hairston or Kuhn. For

Connors, rhetoric's movement towards "scientism" had detrimental

consequences:

> In our laudable desire to improve our discipline we
> must not lose sight of the danger of falling into
> scientistic fallacies and trying to enforce empirical
> canons that must, if they are to be useful, grow
> naturally from previously-solved puzzles. We must
> beware worshipping what Suzanne Langer calls 'The
> Idols of the Laboratory' - Physicalism, Methodology,
> Jargon, Objectivity, Mathematization - the enshrining
> of which values (so necessary in natural sciences) in
> human sciences leads only to a blindered pseudo-
> certainty. (18)

This "blindered pseudo-certainty" that Connors warns 20th century

compositionists about is the same thing Sharon Crowley

concluded, in *The Methodical Memory*, was the unfortunate hallmark of the empirical science-spurred advent of Current-Traditional Rhetoric in nineteenth century America. For Crowley, the rigorous privileging of Reason by the "natural" or "physical" Sciences – engendered through scientific investigation and the collection and cataloguing of scientific knowledge and "truth" – manifested itself in rhetoric through a "quasi-scientific bias" against anything that was "nonrational" or simply "irrational": all that is disparate and unpredictable and impetuous and, yet again, uncertain. And 19th century rhetoricians' adoption of those Reason-headed principles and even practices of the science laboratory was inappropriate because, as Crowley declares, "Rhetoric is notoriously unscientific" (10), explaining further, later in her book, that, "Given its inextricable connection with specific cultural and social contexts, […] rhetorical practice and its effects are not predictable in the ways in which philosophers of rhetoric have assumed them to be. That is to say, rhetorical theory cannot be scientific" (166). But, unfortunately, those rhetorical theorists and practitioners whose work would serve as the foundation for Current-Traditional Rhetoric did indeed imitate Science, or at least attempt to, most crucially its deification of Reason. Upon the consequences of this privileging of Reason

because of its "epistemological superiority" by 19th century

rhetoricians, Crowley writes:

> The modern faith in scientific knowledge as the
> resource that would ultimately improve the quality of
> human life, along with the modern reduction of
> language to a medium of representation, had
> disastrous effects for a number of classical
> disciplines. Among these, rhetoric was a primary
> casualty. […] [M]odern epistemology, with its
> insistence on the superiority of reason, its interest
> in systems, and its assumption that language is a
> docile, reflective medium, was inimical to rhetoric.
> (9-10).

Further explaining those "disastrous effects" in much more

detail towards the end of her book during an examination of the

influence of 19th Scottish rhetorician Alexander Bain, she spares

little criticism:

> Current-traditional rhetoric […] associated
> discourse production with only one faculty - reason.
> […] [Bain's] privileging of the understanding
> ghettoized those genres of discourse - oratory and
> poetry – which were assumed to appeal to the less
> uniform and less predictable faculties. […] The
> faith of current-traditional rhetoric was that the
> dissemination of knowledge, if suitably packaged,
> would eliminate disagreements among informed persons.
> And for Bain, at least, a welcome consequence of the
> realization of this ideal would be the death of
> rhetoric. […]
> Its emphasis on reason also explains why
> writers in the textbook tradition were so firmly
> opposed to students exercising their imagination.
> […] Since a writer's use of artistic method depended
> on the specific rhetorical situations in which she
> found herself, its movements were not generalizable
> or predictable. The very reason for the textbooks'
> subscription to reason as the dominant faculty was
> its postulated uniform operation in every person; the
> guarantee for this uniformity was the production of
> uniformly similar discourses. Deviation from the
> norm was simply not thinkable, not only because such
> discourse was imaginative, or impassioned, or will
> not, but because it was irrational. (157)

What I see here is an urge for that very same sense of order, stability, authority, and control that we have seen before. It is an urge for a reality or "truth" that is universal and static. It is an overwhelming and almost uncontrollable urge for Certainty. And the writing privileged and prescribed by Current-Traditional Rhetoric, as Crowley has begun to describe it here, was supposed to be the means to that end.

But I feel I am moving ahead of myself a little here. Before I dissect Current-Traditional Rhetoric any further, I would continue to examine the exact nature of Western Science that has been looming over these past few pages because, as I have tried to express, this modern, reason-hearted Science was a secular resurrection of the millennia-old Western Religious traditions, of that tradition of the Christian God and his Word, his son Jesus Christ, the Logos incarnate, the "supreme" and "absolute" Reason of Plato and the philosophers of classic rhetoric. Through this, Certainty had begotten Certainty, but not simply continued but intensified, thanks in no small part to the theories of René Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century. In France, Descartes worked to conceive of a system of knowledge founded almost exclusively upon deductive reasoning, with his famous

proclamation "Cogito Ergo Sum," offered in his *Discourse On Method* of 1637, standing as its cornerstone. Because of his methodological skepticism, what would become known as "Cartesian doubt," he contended that that thusly accrued rational knowledge was not simply unbreakable, but that it was a universal "truth," in accord, through Reason, with the very laws of nature, "an intricate impersonal machine directly ordered by mathematical law" (Tarnas 267). While Descartes attempted to lay bare those "laws" – and thus the "Truth" behind them – with his philosophical investigations in the realms of physics and astronomy, it would ultimately fall to Newton in England to elucidate those "laws" of nature and the universe and enlighten humanity with them. Possibly the most notable of these was that of gravity, "a universal force […] that could simultaneously cause both the fall of stones to the Earth and the closed orbits of the planets around the Sun" (269), all from an apple falling from a tree, or so the story goes. Of the significance of Newton's appearance to the scientific world, Tarnas writes:

> With an exemplary combination of empirical and
> deductive rigor, Newton had formulated a very
> few overarching laws that appeared to govern
> the entire cosmos. Through his three laws of
> motion […] and the theory of universal
> gravitation, he not only established a physical
> basis for all of Kepler's laws, but was also
> able to derive the movements of tides, the
> precession of the equinoxes, the orbits of

> comets, the trajectory motion of cannonballs
> and other projectiles – indeed, all the known
> phenomena of celestial and terrestrial
> mechanics were now unified under one set of
> physical laws. […] Newton had struggled to
> discover the grand design of the universe, and
> had patently succeeded. Descarte's vision of
> nature as a perfectly ordered machine governed
> by mathematical laws and comprehensible by
> human science was fulfilled. (270)

With Newton and his discovery of the very laws of nature itself, the Logos and the Word of God had been proven, seemingly, through theorems and formulae. The universe and the "truth" about it – and by proxy, very possibly, God himself – could be measured, weighed, charted, and demonstrated. In short, "Newton had revealed the true nature of reality" and, therein, had "established […] the foundation of a new world view" (270). All of its mysteries could not only be known but, in essence, *possessed*, through scientific investigation and ratiocination. According to physician and renowned alternative medicine practitioner and Dr. Andrew Weil, this knowledge gained from science's "ability to describe, predict, and control the phenomenal world" was *power*, "power to use the forces of nature" (258). Explaining further, Weil writes:

> The picture drawn by Descartes and Newton was (and
> is) very appealing. It demystified much of reality,
> putting distance between the modern, scientific world
> and a superstitious past in which people lived in
> fear of supernatural forces and unpredictable
> deities. Also, it worked very well, conferring a
> high degree of ability to describe, predict, and
> control the observable world. Using this model,
> Western scientists were able to achieve an
> unprecedented level of technological power in the
> 1800s and thus dominate the world. (260-1)

This power of modern Western science brought a sense of safety from feelings "unpredictability and impotence in the face of a mysterious, possibly hostile universe" (258). Out of this, it brought a sense of control and authority over that "observable world" of Weil's. In the end, it brought Certainty. Because of Newton and those investigators and theorists like Copernicus, Galileo, Vesalius, and Descartes before him, Western Science had brought to the world a Certainty heretofore not known, because it was founded not in faith alone but in numbers – again, "fixed and immutable," "absolute and unshakeable" - or so it would seem. And the basic perspective upon reality and "truth" of Western Science and the ideology formulated from it would see what was possibly its purest articulation with Western Medicine, which, curiously and with little coincidence, saw its greatest advances and the dawn of its very own "modern" age during that same time that witnessed the birth of Current-Traditional Rhetoric: the nineteenth century.

I have to admit that I have been "stuck," for lack of a better word, upon the similarities I believed I have witnessed between Western Medicine and Current-Traditional Rhetoric since I wrote my Master's thesis so many years ago now. Medicine had already begun rising from out of the shadows of devil and witch-obsessed superstition by the time of the Renaissance and, by the eighteenth century, a new rational approach to illness and

disease brought about by the influence of the Enlightenment

resulted in a number of respectable advances. However,

according to Dr. Erwin Ackerknecht, it was not until the

nineteenth century that medicine made its greatest progress. Of

this, Ackerknecht explains:

> Medicine had been scientific in intention for a long
> time. But only during the nineteenth century did it
> become to a large extent scientific in fact. In
> general it was the systematic promotion and
> application of natural science which gave the
> nineteenth century its most characteristic features.
> (145)

For Ackerknecht, the influence of Western Science, with its

utter reverence of Reason and all that this entailed, upon the

theory and practice of medicine, "the application of the basic

sciences to the problems of clinical medicine" (156) as

Ackerknecht put it, cannot be stressed enough. To that end,

Ackerknecht continues:

> The basic sciences gave medicine an unprecedented
> knowledge of the intricate structures of the human
> body. They provided a means of correlating
> pathological signs with changes in those structures;
> they allowed the main functions of the body […] to be
> understood as never before; they made possible the
> objective measurement of these functions and their
> deviations from the normal; and they made therapeutic
> action equally predictable and measurable. It is
> obvious that this new background was to have a
> decisive influence on the future development of
> clinical medicine. (168-9)

Of crucial significance here is the concept of the rendering of

health as well as illness "predictable and measurable," in

particular with regard to some "normal" standard. Through the

use of the principles of basic science, physicians practicing

under the aegis of Western medicine believed that illness and

disease could not only be predicted and measured but, perhaps

more critically, controlled. Western physicians sought to

arrive at a single unifying diagnosis of some cluster of

symptoms brought about by a single, underlying cause, which

could then be cured through a single, definitive treatment.

What resulted from this perspective of illness was an extremely

linear progression of medical phenomena: Bacteria or Virus A

begets Symptoms B which beget Disease C which begets Cure D.

This has become known as "The Germ Theory," which, according to

alternative medicine author Dr. Dean Black in his book *Health At

the Crossroads*, contends that, "[D]iseases are caused by

microorganisms that invade us and disturb our inner chemistry.

[…] The medical goal here is to kill the germs before they kill

us" (14). In this way, the intended cure for those "germs"

works as a sort of "magic bullet": one treatment, one kill.

This Western system that arose in the nineteenth century stood

in opposition to the far older Eastern Medicine, which perceived

multiple causes for illness and disease and, accordingly,

multiple treatments. From this Eastern perspective, illness was

not "predictable and measurable," at least not with any degree

of certainty, because it acknowledged the "mystery" – that which

is uncertain – in human health and illness, as well as the

greater universe. This is more in tune with contemporary

medical science, which offers a more "holistic" perspective, in

that it recognizes not simply the physical but the "nonphysical"

aspects of health and illness, such as environmental and

psychological stressors. In the end, this is a more "whole"

portrait of health and illness, which Weil defines in this way:

> Health is wholeness - wholeness in its most profound
> sense with nothing left out and everything in just
> the right order to manifest the mystery of balance.
> Far from being simply the absence of disease, health
> is a dynamic and harmonious equilibrium of all the
> elements and forces making up and surrounding a human
> being. (51)

Because of that "mystery," such a portrait of health and illness

is also an uncertain portrait. And similarly uncertain is the

physician's control of illness. But this was not the case with

nineteenth century Western medicine. For physicians of that

time, new-found knowledge of the human mysteries obtained from

the advances of those Reason-worshipping basic sciences brought

them certainty about nature. And that certainty brought them

control – mastery – of nature, of life and death. Black

explains the significance of that "mastery":

> The medical question, to be precise, was this:
> Does the body have innate adaptive powers that are
> sufficient to protect it from disease? America's
> most famous colonial doctor, Benjamin Rush […]
> answered that question, in essence, as follows:
> "although a certain self-acting power does exist in
> the organism, it is subject to ordinary physical and
> chemical laws, and in any case, it is not strong
> enough to withstand the onslaughts of disease."
> Having answered that question, Rush moved to a
> second question that follows naturally from the
> first: given the body's apparent incapacity to
> defend itself, what shall the role of the physician
> be? To this Rush answered, "Although physicians are
> in speculation the servants, yet in practice they are

> the masters of nature ... Instead of waiting for the
> slow operations of nature to eliminate a supposed
> morbid matter from the body, art should take the
> business out of her hands." (13-4)

In short, as Black summarizes the demeanor of Western medicine,

in particular as practiced in America, "[A]lthough doctors may

acknowledge the body's healing power in speculation, in practice

scientific medicine's most fundamental premise directs them to

become nature's masters" (14). In the world conceived by

Western medicine, reality and "truth" were dualistic, ordered,

static, and universal. And because of physicians' knowledge of

the anatomical and physiological workings of world, they had

control and authority over the "mystery" beneath its skin. It

was a world of scientific and medical certainty – and they were

the masters of that certainty. Again, the attraction of that

"star," as Richard Weaver had described it, that was Western

science, and medicine, was undeniable and difficult to resist.

When, then, references are made to teachers as "doctors,"

"curing" students of bad grammar, bad spelling, bad structure,

and, very well, bad thinking, as a stricken patient would be

treated for some infectious disease, what does such an analogy

really mean?

    With religion as well as science and medicine behind us, I

arrive now at the last of those three broader social and

cultural forces that, as I have said, I believe had converged

like some "perfect storm" in nineteenth century America to

transform that Connors' "2,500-year-old intellectual tradition" into what became known as Current-Traditional Rhetoric: politics. For me, this aspect of that confluence of influence, rhetoric's triple-weighted burden, was somewhat difficult to place in this discussion because of a small "chicken versus egg" dilemma: do politics inform religion and science or do religion and science inform politics? While I believe that the answer is actually found with both possibilities, in a continual back-and-forth phenomenon, I find the former to be the beginning of that succession. However, beyond that, I simply find it to be the more curious movement in that synergy. Politics translated the Certainty-promulgating perspectives rooted in Western society by religion and then validated by science and medicine into governmental law and policy. Because of this, the certainty privileged and perpetuated by politics did not simply have philosophical or ideological consequences but very real consequences: upon the real lives of real inhabitants of the real world, outside of the pages of a bible or a medical textbook. I would return to Ackerknecht's estimation of 19th century America: "The United States was a new country; yet its roots were firmly grounded in an older civilization. It was faced with the problem of assimilating as rapidly as possible the attainments of the mother-countries of Europe" (218). Ackerknecht is referring to America in the nineteenth century

and, during this time, "assimilate" America did. With the
"Louisiana Purchase" in 1803, America bought from France the
territory occupied by the present day states of Arkansas,
Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, South
Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, and Minnesota. With the
"Mexican-American War" in 1846, America won from Mexico the
territory occupied by the present day states of Texas, New
Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California. With
the so-called "Seward's Folly" in 1867, America bought from
Russia the territory occupied by the present day state of
Alaska. And with the "Spanish-American War" in 1898, America
won as "foreign territories" the islands of the Philippines,
Puerto Rico, and Guam. This was "Manifest Destiny" manifested
through acquisition and war – and seemingly, as Ackerknecht
wrote, "as rapidly as possible."

It is greatly ironic that America, its own existence as a
colony of England a fact of a not so distant past, was utterly
intent on expansion and colonization. This was the spirit of
the nineteenth century for America and, as I have already tried
to express, it was a spirit rising from out of the
consanguineous ideology – conscious or unconscious, published or
unpublished – of Western religion and Western science, which was
itself founded upon a fundamental perspective towards reality
and "truth" that ignored all that was foreign, abnormal, and

unpredictable – again, all that was uncertain – in its yearnings

for order, control, and authority over the natural world and

natural phenomena. In the end, that "spirit" of America in the

nineteenth century was defined by Dewey's "quest for certainty,"

a Certainty "fixed and immutable," "absolute" and "supreme."

The "reality" or "truth" of the world, and all those who lived

upon it, was defined by nineteenth and twentieth century

American politics – if not 21st century American politics as well

– through Tarnas' "unchanging doctrinal formulae" of Perry's

"polar terms of we-right-good vs. other-wrong-bad." Because of

this, American politics was Western religion and American

politics was Western science. And American politics in the

nineteenth century translated that basic certainty-ordained

perspective of Western religion and science into legislation to

procure territory and declare war.

This process through which religion and science and

politics coalesce and then spread out through human culture and

society with, again, very real consequences in a very real world

can be best explained, I believe, by literary and cultural

critic Edward Said with his book *Culture and Imperialism*, his

1993 study of the artifacts of Western imperialism in the pages

of Western literature. To Said, while overt colonialism has

ended for the most part, an imperialistic agenda "lingers where

it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well

as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social

practices" (9). Because of this, while French settlements no

longer occupy the Congo and while English rule no longer holds

sway over India, this does not mean that imperialism does not

persist. While the corporeal presence of those former colonial

sovereigns has passed with time, their influence remains in the

form of ideological perspectives of reality and "truth." And it

is this influence that surges beneath the surface of culture.

Of this, Said writes:

> The main idea is that even as we must fully
> comprehend the pastness of the past, there is no just
> way in which the past can be quarantined from the
> present. Past and present inform each other. […]
> [S]carcely any attention has been paid to what I
> believe is the privileged role of culture in the
> modern imperial experience, and little notice taken
> of the fact that the extraordinary global reach of
> classical nineteenth- and twentieth-century European
> imperialism still casts a considerable shadow over
> our own times. (4-5)

For Said, again, while colonies may be a thing of the past, the

imperialistic ideology that decreed that colonial ships sail to

distant shores remains. And I feel that imperialism's

perspective upon reality and "truth" rises from out of Dewey's

"quest for certainty": a campaign to achieve order, control,

and authority over nature and those who dwell within it through

the disregard for and restraint of the "foreign" – flesh and

blood embodiments of all that is uncertain. For Said, the

nineteenth century is crucial to understanding that perspective

because it "climaxed 'the rise of the West' […]. No other

associated set of colonies in history was as large, none so

totally dominated, none so unequal in power to the Western

metropolis" (7). Because of this, then, that perspective was

most explicitly exhibited during the nineteenth century. And

according to Said, this imperialist perspective of the world and

those who live in it had particular criteria that defined it as

"imperialist":

> [Imperialism and colonialism] are supported and
> perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological
> formations that include notions that certain
> territories and people require and beseech
> domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated
> with domination: the vocabulary of classic
> nineteenth-century imperial culture is plentiful with
> words and concepts like 'inferior' or 'subject
> races,' 'subordinate peoples,' 'dependency,'
> 'expansion,' and 'authority.' Out of the imperial
> experiences, notions about culture were clarified,
> reinforced, criticized, or rejected. (9)

Said's explanation of that perspective continues:

> [T]here is more than [profit] to imperialism and
> colonialism. There was a commitment to them over and
> above profit, a commitment in constant circulation
> and recirculation, which, on the one hand, allowed
> decent men and women to accept the notion that
> distant territories and their native peoples should
> be subjugated, and, on the other, replenished
> metropolitan energies so that these decent people
> could think of the imperium as a protracted, almost
> metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate,
> inferior, or less advanced peoples. (10)

In short, "[T]he enterprise of empire depends upon the idea of

having an empire" (11).

It is in the third chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* that

Said offers his most vivid example of imperialism's legacy in

literature with his discussion of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of*

Darkness. For Said, it was in the pages of Conrad's novel that

you could not only observe the workings of that ideology but its

inadequacies as well. And these inadequacies are rooted in

imperialism's ignorance of that "heart of darkness," the chaotic

and dissonant unknown – very well that dreaded uncertainty –

which poses a palpable threat to its claim to order, control,

and authority.

> [N]either Conrad nor Marlow gives us a full view of
> what is outside the world-conquering attitudes
> embodied by Kurtz, Marlow, the circle of listeners on
> the deck of the *Nellie*, and Conrad. By that I mean
> that *Heart of Darkness* works so effectively because
> its politics and aesthetics are, so to speak,
> imperialist […]. For if we cannot truly understand
> someone else's experience and if we must therefore
> depend upon the assertive authority of the sort of
> power that Kurtz wields as a white man in the jungle
> or that Marlow, another white man, wields as
> narrator, there is no use looking for other, non-
> imperialist alternatives; the system has simply
> eliminated them and made them unthinkable. (24)

To Said, Conrad was able to present a dualistic presentation of

an imperialistic "truth" about reality. Of this, he writes:

> By accentuating the official "idea" of empire and the
> remarkably disorienting actuality of Africa, Marlow
> unsettles the reader's sense not only of the very
> idea of empire, but of something more basic, reality
> itself. For if Conrad can show that all human
> activity depends on controlling a radically unstable
> reality to which words approximate only by will or
> convention, the same is true of empire, of venerating
> the idea, and so forth. […] What appears stable and
> secure […] is only slightly more secure than the
> white men in the jungle, and requires the same
> continuous (but precarious) triumph over an all-
> pervading darkness. (29)

This "epistemology inevitable and unavoidable" of imperialism

that Said puts on display here is, I believe, the same

perspective upon knowledge, upon "reality" and "truth," at the

heart of Western religion and Western science and medicine.

They are all cut from the same cloth. And that proverbial cloth

bears the mark of Certainty: the need for it; the search for

it; the fear of not having it. It is all there: the extreme

privileging of all that is normal and uniform and familiar and

docile because of its guarantee of the perpetuation and

propagation of order, control, and authority and, to all of it,

uncertainty was anathema, like the black-skinned natives at that

heart of Conrad's … *Darkness* to Marlow and the rest of the other

white ivory merchants in Africa. The America of the nineteenth

century was teeming with this same perspective, this

"epistemology inevitable and unavoidable," and it suffused

through every strata of American society and culture.

   With this being so, is the rise of Current-Traditional

Rhetoric during that same nineteenth century truly a simple

"coincidence"? As an answer, or at least my answer, I would

recall James Berlin's characterization of writing instructors'

place in the classroom sanctioned by Current-Traditional

rhetoric as "the caretakers of the English tongue, and more

important, the gatekeepers on the road to good things in life,

as defined by the professional class" (72). Building upon what

Berlin has claimed, I now offer Crowley's description of

Current-Traditional rhetoric and its role, its *purpose*, in

nineteenth century education in America:

> In its institutionalized form - freshman composition
> - current-traditional writing instruction served the
> academy as a useful mud fence, guarding it from the
> unsupervised and uncontained sprawl of self-initiated
> analytical or critical student discourse. As Plato
> complained thousands of years ago, written discourses
> have the habit of floating all over the place and of
> getting into the wrong hands unless some means of
> control is established over who can write and who
> will be read [...]. Current-traditional rhetoric was
> the control developed within the academy. When
> students were instructed in it, all concerned could
> rest assured that few students would produce writing
> that demanded to be read and heeded. (153)

With this role as "useful mud fence," Current-Traditional

rhetoric would seem to have had a definite purpose wholly

outside of "writing," Crowley's explanation of which I offered

earlier, but to which I would return for the purpose of

underscoring her meaning:

> [L]ate nineteenth-century attempts to
> standardize composition instruction may have sprung
> from motives other than that of relieving composition
> teachers from some of the burden of paper grading.
> [L]anguage arts instruction was efficiently (because
> silently) geared to include those whose manners and
> class it reflected. Those whose manners were not
> middle-class either adapted or were excluded.
> […]
> The formal standards […] imposed on student
> writers reflected ethical and social values fully as
> much as intellectual ones. A discourse marked by
> unity, coherence, and emphasis, stringently
> construed, would of necessity reflect a strong sense
> of limitations, of what was possible, as well as a
> grasp of the proper relations of things in the
> universe. (137-8)

From Berlin and Crowley's criticisms, it would seem that

Current-Traditional rhetoric was not simply about writing, but,

much more so, about thinking: *correct and proper thinking*. And

so, with that said, I would ask the question again: is the rise

of Current-Traditional Rhetoric in America during the nineteenth
century, with those pressures from religion, science, and
politics bearing down upon American schools and the instructors
teaching within them, again, truly a simple "coincidence"?

III.

Before I continue any further, a confession has to be made
…

I love Certainty.

I love all that it entails and all that it represents. I
love order. I love control. I love stability. I cannot say,
though, that I love authority. This basic inclination towards
Certainty, this tendency of thinking and doing, translates
itself in some very particular, and admittedly peculiar, ways.
These habits of mine have indeed helped me in many ways, in
particular with success in school, but despite this, they, and
that fundamental inclination towards Certainty from which they
arose, were limiting, like a collar or a yoke, and I had begun
to feel their weight upon me. I began to feel as if I was
passing through life like "J. Alfred Prufrock" from T. S.
Eliot's "Love Song …", spending too much of my time "measur[ing]
out my life with coffee spoons" and too little of it
"wonder[ing], 'Do I dare?' […] Do I dare/Disturb the universe?"
And why? Because, very simply, as Eliot wrote in 1917, "[I]n
short, I was afraid." Throughout most of my life, I had been
afraid of the unfortunate vagaries and vicissitudes of life –
what seemed to me like the fundamental Uncertainty of the
universe – and my attempts to surround myself with Certainty,

even in those simple yet specific ways I chose to live in my world and with and around the things in my world, was indeed a security blanket, knitted out of stability, predictability, order, and control. It was an exemplification of John Dewey's "quest for Certainty," as I tried to explain it in the chapter before: humanity's equally fundamental search for "a certainty which shall be absolute and unshakeable" (6) and, therein, "a peace which is assured, an object which is unqualified by risk and the shadow of fear" (8). Dewey's "quest" – *my* quest – was for a sense of "reality," a sense of place and purpose amidst that "reality," that was "absolute and unshakeable"; again, "fixed and immutable." However, all of this said, I have learned that, despite your hardest and most earnest efforts with that "quest," despite all of your planning and despite your lists and despite your rigorous systems of organization, life is simply not so very Certain. The only control and order, the only Certainty, you can truly have in this world is that which you convince yourself that you have. It is a lesson that I have learned; it was a lesson that I have had to learn because of confronting the uncertainties of life, of the world, of the universe. I may not love it, let alone even like it, and I may even at times hate it, with every fiber of my being, but I have learned to welcome Uncertainty, as you would welcome winter's bitter cold winds or briny waves crashing down upon your head.

It is an unavoidable fact of life. It is part of the very
fabric of the universe, of our physical reality.

   One of the first things that you learn in college chemistry
courses is the basic Laws of Thermodynamics, of which there are
three. But it is the second that is of actual importance here,
at least for me. This Second Law deals with the concept of
entropy. It states that systems move from a state of order to a
state of chaos. As Dean Black defines it: "[E]ntropy isn't so
much a process as a measure of disorder. The higher the
entropy, the greater the disorder" (25). Furthering his
definition, he writes: "This drift towards chaos – toward
entropy – is what happens when things get left to themselves.
[…][A]ll physical processes tend irreversibly to move in one
direction – from a state of higher order to a state of lower
order" (25). It is the natural way of the universe. The
epitome of this process is the progression of natural existence
from life, the very definition of order, to death, the very
definition of chaos. Be this as it may, it would seem to have
been the mission of Western science and medicine, at least until
the dawn of the "post-modern" age of Western world and the
epochal arrival of Albert Einstein's theories of Relativity and
Quantum Physics and the like, to reverse this Second Law of
Thermodynamics: to transform chaos into order. For Black, such

an undertaking is equivalent to holding a boulder at rest upon a

steep hill:

> The situation would be unnatural now, because the
> boulder's tendency would be otherwise. You can hold
> it only by opposing its natural tendency. This would
> not be a self-sustaining situation. There would be a
> certain order to it, and you might count yourself
> pleased with it. But it is *your* order. You created
> it; you are responsible for it. If you decide you
> don't want to maintain *your* order, it unravels the
> instant you give it up. (26)

But Western science and medicine, as well as much of the greater

Western world, has indeed chosen to hold back that very same

boulder: the boulder of chaos, of disorder, of Uncertainty.

And that germ of very natural, universal Uncertainty –

unignorable, inevitably, in spite of the widespread influence of

Christianity, Western science and medicine, and Western

imperialism – would seem to have been the herald of the Post-

Modern Age. Of this, Richard Tarnas explains:

> By the end of the third decade of the twentieth
> century, virtually every major postulate of the
> earlier scientific conception had been controverted
> […]. […] Confronted with the contradictions
> observed in subatomic phenomena, Einstein wrote:
> "All my attempts to adapt the theoretical foundation
> of physics to this knowledge failed completely. It
> was as if the ground had been pulled out from under
> one, with no firm foundation to be seen anywhere upon
> which one could have been built." (356)

Upon this, Tarnas continues:

> Physicists failed to come to any consensus as to how
> the existing evidence should be interpreted with
> respect to defining the ultimate nature of reality.
> Conceptual contradictions, disjunctions, and
> paradoxes were ubiquitous, and stubbornly evaded
> resolution. A certain irreducible irrationality,
> already recognized in the human psyche, now emerged
> in the structure of the physical world itself. (358)

Tarnas refers to those "contradictions, disjunctions, and paradoxes," that "certain irreducible irrationality," written upon the face of the universe itself as the "uncertainty principle." And the effects of that "uncertainty principle" extended far beyond science laboratories and lecture halls, far beyond talk of atoms and space, and altered humanity's very perceptions of "reality" and, thereby, "truth":

> Modern man was being forced to question his inherited classical Greek faith that the world was ordered in a manner clearly accessible to the human intelligence. […] Thus incoherence, unintelligibility, and an insecure relativism compounded the earlier modern predicament of human alienation in an impersonal cosmos. (358-9)

If those "truths" of Western science fall away – "truths" that were put forth and embraced as, again, "supreme" and "absolute," in utter accord with the always and forever Reason of the universe itself and, thus, tantamount to a flawless translation of the Word of God into equations and formulae - what of the other "truths" that Western culture and society, possibly the *whole* of human culture and society, hold dear and sacred and use, consciously or unconsciously, to paint a portrait of "reality," their world and their place, and purpose, within it? Upon this same question, Tarnas concludes: "In the combined wake of eighteenth-century philosophy and twentieth-century science, the modern mind was left free of absolutes, but also disconcertingly free of any solid ground" (359). "Free."

This new Post-Modern world that found itself in the wake of the Theory of Relativity and Quantum Physics and the splitting of the atom was indeed "free" of the "fixed" and "free" of the "immutable." "Free" of Certainty. But such a situation is indeed schizophrenic. I cannot think of a more fitting way to describe the contradictory emotions a full realization of such a "freedom" must stir. To take a step back for a moment, Maureen O'Hara and Walter Truett Anderson, in "Welcome to the Postmodern World," offer a simple and useful definition of what "Post-Modern" actually means. About the "Post-Modern," they write:

> A society enters the postmodern age when it loses faith in absolute truth – even the attempt to discover absolute truth. The great systems of thought like religions, ideologies, and philosophies come to be regarded as 'social constructions of reality.' These systems may be useful, even respected as profoundly true, but true in a new, provisional, postmodern way. (9)

And of the psychological or emotional or even "spiritual" impact of such a "los[s] of faith," O'Hara and Anderson offer yet another simple, useful explanation: "The bad news about postmodern life is the serious despair, emptiness, and social disintegration that sometimes follow the disappearance of all certainties. The good news is the freedom it offers, the great wealth of opportunities to explore life" (11). As O'Hara and Anderson suggest, it is not easy to deal with the realization of such a, again, schizophrenic situation because of the threat and the floundering and the simple, sheer confusion. Of the "good

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news" of such pervasive and overwhelming Uncertainty, as I have suggested before, losing that collar or yoke of Certainty can be truly *freeing* – like a rebirth. Like putting a new brush to a canvas that has been stripped clean of layer upon layer of old paint. Once the older portraits and the perspectives and meanings and purposes and, yes, "realities" therein have been cleared away, something new can be tried, even if that "something new" is not yet exactly known. As Mark Twain wrote at the end of his posthumously published novella, *The Mysterious Stranger*, a condemnation of what he called "the damned human race" and its hypocritical, self-righteous "Moral Sense": "Dream other dreams, and better!"

With regards to *writing* – the reason I am sitting here, writing this – and in particular my very own writing, I have found that welcoming of Uncertainty to be, again, freeing. I am reminded of some particular words of advice from Ray Bradbury's *Zen in the Art of Writing*. It was something that had a great influence upon me, and it still does: "Tomorrow, pour cold critical water upon the simmering coals. Time enough to think and cut and rewrite tomorrow. But today – explode – fly apart – disintegrate!" (7) And because I had taken Bradbury's thoughts about writing to heart, it should not have come as a surprise, then, that when I was introduced to the "process" or "expressivist" theories of Peter Elbow – others' designations

and not his, I realize – by way of *Writing Without Teachers*, I was so attracted to what he had to say about writing, to how he saw writing. Those two writers, one writing from out of the world of popular fiction and the other that of academia but both writing to share their lessons, and love, of writing, allowed me to see and re-see each of those worlds with greater clarity and greater understanding. This sort of converging of worlds, the curricular with the non-curricular, has been very common for me throughout the years and it has influenced me as both a writer *and* a teacher of writing because, through it, I could see that, no matter how separate they may seem, their correspondence is profound. But to return to Elbow, of the fear that may come from experiencing the uncertainty offered through the "explosive" writing Bradbury had decreed, he explains:

> The reason it feels like chaos and disorientation to write freely is because you are giving up a good deal of control. You are allowing yourself to proceed without a full plan – or allowing yourself to depart from whatever plan you have. You are trying to let the words, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions try to find some of their own order, logic, coherence. You're trying to get your material to do some of the steering instead of doing it all yourself. (31-2)

For Elbow, such "chaos and disorientation" is not simply good for writing, it is an utter necessity if it is to avoid becoming the sort of "boring obvious writing" that is produced when writers "patch up, mop up, neaten up the half-cooked and unsatisfactory ideas they find lying around in their head" (72):

when writers shrink from that uncertainty and seek out comfort in the form of control and order. As he puts it so very simply: "Insisting on control, having a plan or outline, and always sticking to it is a prophylactic against organic growth, development, change. But it is also a prophylactic against the experience of chaos and disorientation which are very frightening" (35). Regardless of whatever plan or purpose you may have in mind, when you sit down to write, the stark white, cold and blank page before you – whether actual paper or a new Word document – is the very face of uncertainty and it can indeed be a very "frightening" thing to look upon. What should you say? How should you say it? And what will happen to the whole if you do not say it as you *should*? I still have no love for that feeling of unease, that feeling of loneliness, that feeling of doubt when I stare down at that wordless page and it has no answers for me. However, as I said before, I have welcomed uncertainty with my writing because I have witnessed what can come from it, what can come from the likes of Bradbury's advice and from Elbow's advice. It can hold open the door to foreign worlds, alien worlds, worlds that do not make sense and do not feel safe. It can also hold open the door to your world – your own already familiar and already known world – but allow you to see it in ways you have never seen it before.

But this is not something afforded by the simple act of writing, the mental and physical process of stringing together words into sentences and sentences into paragraphs and so forth, but, perhaps even more so, by the thinking that vivifies it. While you can think without writing, you cannot write without thinking: thinking before you write about what you want or need to write; thinking as you write; thinking about what you wrote after you've written it. In a sense, they are inseparable. In *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow suggests that, if writers are to free themselves, and their writing, from the control and order that can suffocate the process, they should "[L]et things get out of hand, let things wander and digress" (32-3). I believe that Elbow's advice, which embraces that freedom found in Uncertainty, applies not simply to what the pen or the keyboard put down upon that blank page but to, again, the thinking that embodies those words, like a soul. That said, I would return to Hélène Cixous and recall something from the first chapter. For Cixous, when we write …

> We go toward the best known unknown thing, where
> knowing and not knowing touch, where we hope we will
> know what is unknown. Where we hope we will not be
> afraid of understanding the incomprehensible, facing
> the invisible, hearing the inaudible, thinking the
> unthinkable, which is of course: thinking. Thinking
> is trying to think the unthinkable: thinking the
> thinkable is not worth the effort. (38)

What Cixous is promoting is not only the marriage of writing and thinking but the need for both of Uncertainty: the pursuit of

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Uncertainty and the prolonging of Uncertainty. What we also have here, which puts this French post-modern/post-structural theorist in agreement with Elbow, is the almost conscious avoidance of Certainty and all that it necessitates: control, order, predictability, stability, authority. Because of the symbiotic relationship between writing and thinking, a conformity to Certainty for what is written upon the blank page means a conformity to Certainty for what is thought – all of the ideas and beliefs and, yes, "truths" that are swarming and surging in the writer's brain throughout the whole of the writing process. And beyond. But such a thing is contrary to the Uncertainty that is fundamental not simply to this post-modern age but to the very workings of the universe. And because of this, it is, in a word, *unnatural*.

This Uncertainty, which is, as the likes of Bradbury and Elbow and Cixous would have things, indeed very *natural* to writing – and very well the teaching of writing – is often said to have arrived unto the scene of composition and rhetoric with the dawning of that so-called Post-Modern Age, at least according to the common histories of the field of composition and rhetoric. Such a momentous event is perhaps most famously articulated in the February 1982 issue of *College Composition and Communication* by Maxine Hairston with her article "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of

Writing" and her earnest, hopeful claims of a "paradigm shift"

therein. In 1963, Kuhn suggested, influentially, in *The

Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, that, in short and as

summarized by Hairston herself, "revolutions in science come

about as the result of breakdowns in intellectual systems,

breakdowns that occur when old methods won't solve new problems"

(76). Kuhn named the "conceptual model" of some given

intellectual system a "paradigm" and for Kuhn:

> When several people working in a field begin to
> encounter anomalies or phenomena that cannot be
> explained by the established model, the paradigm
> begins to show signs of instability. For a while,
> those who subscribe to the paradigm try to ignore the
> contradictions and inconsistencies that they find, or
> they make improvised ad hoc changes to cope with the
> immediate crises. Eventually, however, when enough
> anomalies accumulate to make a substantial number
> scientists in the field question whether the
> traditional paradigm can solve many of the serious
> problems that face them, a few innovative thinkers
> will devise a new model. (76)

This was the process of what Kuhn called a "paradigm shift."

Bringing this theory of Kuhn's about the beginnings of

"revolutions" in "intellectual systems" to the field of

composition and rhetoric, Hairston proposed, with no small

return of eventual controversy it would seem, that "the

developments that are taking place in our profession […], the

most prominent of which is the move to a process-centered theory

of teaching writing, indicates that our profession is possibly

in the first stages of a paradigm shift" (77). The "traditional

paradigm" of composition and rhetoric that Hairston saw as

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falling away to such a "shift" should be no stranger to you or

to me, at least not according to the description of it that she

offers. All the tell-tale features are there and of them,

building upon previous estimations offered by Richard Young and

James Berlin, she writes:

> [I]ts adherents believe that competent writers know
> what they are going to say before they begin to
> write; thus their most important task when they are
> preparing to write is finding a form into which to
> organize their content. They also believe that the
> composing process is linear, that it proceeds
> systematically from prewriting to writing to
> rewriting. Finally, they believe that teaching
> editing is teaching writing. (78)

These are but some of the defining traits of that so-called

"Current-Traditional Rhetoric," the "traditional paradigm" of

Hairston's post-Kuhnian perspective of composition and rhetoric.

But Hairston would seem to want to critique not so much that

"traditional paradigm" itself but, rather, its followers: those

who, whether consciously or not, serve to perpetuate it through

their work in the field; those, to Hairston, "who do most to

promote a static and unexamined approach to teaching writing"

(79). Of them, she declares:

> [T]eachers who concentrate their efforts on teaching
> style, organization, and correctness are not likely
> to recognize that their students need work in
> invention. And if they stress that proofreading and
> editing are the chief skills one uses to revise a
> paper, they won't realize that their students have no
> concept of what it means to make substantive
> revisions in a paper. The traditional paradigm hides
> these problems. Textbooks complicate the problem
> further. (80)

And of that textbook-publishing reality of composition and

rhetoric, Hairston continues:

> As Kuhn repeatedly points out, the standard texts in
> any discipline constitute a major block to a paradigm
> shift because they represent accepted authority.
> Many, though certainly not all, of the standard
> textbooks in rhetoric and composition […] have been
> product-centered books […]. […] And textbooks
> change slowly. Publishers want to keep what sells,
> and they tend to direct the appeals of their books to
> what they believe the average composition teacher
> wants, not to what those in the vanguard of the
> profession would like to have. (80)

What Hairston tried to paint a portrait of was an unfortunate

situation (circa 1982 but perhaps true at other times for

teachers of writing, those before as well as those after)

wherein the conditions of possibility were defined by book

publishers and book-publishing dollars. And those conditions of

possibility established, and was established through, a simple,

straightforward correlation: "static and unexamined"

composition and rhetoric textbooks promoting "static and

unexamined" methods of teaching promoting "static and

unexamined" philosophies of writing and the teaching of writing

promoting a "static and unexamined" paradigm, a basic

perspective of reality, that promoted - very well *worshipped* -

the "Static" and the "Unexamined." Again: Certainty.

However, all of this said, I would return to Hairston's

pronouncement of that "paradigm shift," the existence of which

she rests upon the "insecurity and instability" of that so-

called "traditional paradigm" of hers, Current-Traditional

Rhetoric. She would root that "shift"-inducing "insecurity and

instability" and the changes they wrought within the field of

composition and rhetoric in the "intellectual inquiry and

speculation about language and language learning that was going

on [in the middle 1950's] in several fields, notably

linguistics, anthropology, and clinical and cognitive

psychology" (80). The convergence of influence upon those

various departments within the academy that Hairston refers to

is not unlike that which saw the rise of what would become known

as Current-Traditional Rhetoric in the nineteenth century and,

because of that, is not some simple coincidence. While it was

not the result of some conscious, willful manipulation, it was

indeed the response – an almost *natural* response – to a

pervasive and vehement zeitgeist that suffused the whole of the

academic world and possessed many different and disparate

fields, composition and rhetoric being but one of them. The

effect of the spirit of Uncertainty - professing Tarnas'

"certain irreducible irrationality" and Elbow's "chaos and

disorientation" and Cixous' "best known unknown thing" - upon

previous "static and unexamined" perspectives of reality and

"truth" was an example of Dean Black's scenario of a

manufactured pretense of "order" succumbing to the irrepressible

thrust of entropy. And with the "freedom" that was afforded as

a result of this "shift," teachers and scholars were allowed to

explore the holes that were left behind by the "instability and insecurity" of that old, traditional paradigm. This was, it is said by those like Hairston, the beginning of the Post-Modern Age of composition and rhetoric.

It would seem that the field of composition and rhetoric – the pedagogy, the methods, the scholarship, the research – became occupied, almost *obsessed*, with all that was "Post-" in that thusly emerged Post-Modern epoch. Even if not necessarily in name, then in perspective and attitude: "Post-Structuralism," "Cultural Studies," "Critical Literacy," "Post-Process." Although there are definite distinctions in both intentions and genealogy between these schools of literary theory – and schools of rhetorical theory – and although I would never propose that they are simply genres and subgenres and so forth for novelty's sake alone, they all owe their beginnings, in one way or another, to that very same seminal Post-Modern spirit and, because of that, they are all brimming with that very same Uncertainty, whether they refer to it as such or not, as I alluded to in my first chapter. But my real purpose here is neither to depict their emergence in the field of composition and rhetoric nor to delineate their individual histories thereafter. Because of that, if I should lump them together indiscriminatingly beneath that "Post-Modern" umbrella, I will apologize well in advance.

For my real purpose here then, it is enough - at least hopefully enough – to say that they were the theoretical and critical progeny of that Post-Modern Age. As a whole, they changed the predominant conversation of composition and rhetoric and, because of that, brought Uncertainty to the forefront of the philosophy and practice of the field. As William Covino contends in his book, *The Art of Wondering: A Revisionist Return to the History of Rhetoric*, "Postmodern critical theory 'celebrates' uncertainty, upsetting the generic distinctions that tuck literature, science, and social science away from one another; blurring objectivity and subjectivity, fact and fiction, imagination and reality" (121). And to Covino, such uncertainty is something essential to rhetoric, as he explains, "[P]roponents and practitioners of postmodern critical theory, with their acute sense of the relativism and ambiguity of every statement, are our rhetoricians" (128). And those "rhetoricians" – those theorists whose work either rose from out of the field of composition and rhetoric itself or was brought to composition and rhetoric from outside by appreciators from within the field in order to accomplish some particular end, whether philosophical or practical – would go on to become almost like scholarly "rock stars," veritable academic godheads, to teachers of writing as well those training to be them. Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Mikhail Baktin, Paulo Freire,

Roland Barthes, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Gayatri Spivak, Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, Hélène Cixous. These are but a few of the theorists and critics to whom Covino's appraisal could apply, in no particular order and with no reference to their particular movement or school.

About the response to their work as well as the work of unnamed others, I can attest. Their names are spoken with an utter respect that borders on ecclesiastical reverence. The reading of their books are used to separate the knowledgeable from the ignorant, the devout from the poseur. Their perspectives on language, writing, literature, politics, economics, history, culture, existence, and reality are taken as a gospel of sorts, the revelation of some universal "Truth" – or, at least, a very, *very* good facsimile of it. In Maxine Hairston's "Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing," published by *College Composition and Communication* almost ten years after she had declared that "paradigm shift" in its pages, she explains the "response" to those influential explorers of the Post-Modern, those advocates of Uncertainty:

> Partly out of genuine interest, I'm sure but also out
> of a need to belong to and be approved by the power
> structure, [compositionists] immerse themselves in
> currently fashionable critical theories, read the
> authors that are chic – Foucault, Bakhtin, Giroux,
> Eagleton, and Cixous, for example – then look for
> ways those theorists can be incorporated into their
> own specialty, teaching writing. (184)

Although Hairston is writing about composition theorists'
emulation of literary critics because they are "psychologically
tied to the English departments that are their bases" (184) and
is writing in order to critique – somewhat defensively and
somewhat harshly – the co-opting of writing classrooms by
"radical politics" and the "cultural left" that she sees as
being the end result of this emulation of "post-structuralism
and deconstruction theory, […] the works of Foucault, Raymond
Williams, Terry Eagleton, and Stanley Fish, and […] feminist
theory" (185), I believe Hairston's account can help to explain
the almost fervent regard for such Post-Modern theory and
criticism among beginning students in graduate composition and
rhetoric programs, at least those that I knew and at least the
one that I was. Along with that "need to belong […] and be
approved" is the sheer attraction to the unconventional and the
unorthodox that such work can represent and the thrilling,
almost heady experience an immersion in those pages and the
conversation therein can inaugurate. There is a subverting of
the standard and the status quo and, as I wrote before, such an
unveiling of all that is Uncertain can be *freeing* indeed. And
according to Kurt Spellmeyer in "After Theory: From Textuality
to Attunement with the World," this flirtation with that Post-
Modern fringe would come to also afford a sense of pseudo-

celebrity, which only furthered, and further complicated, the

allure of this Post-Modern literary and rhetorical theory:

> As the tool of a self-styled critical avant-garde,
> theory landed Yale High Church deconstructionists in
> a special section of *Time* magazine, while the
> founders of cultural studies, sporting silk Armani
> jackets, made fashion statements for the sputtering
> New York press. Trivial as these events might seem,
> they tell us something essential about theory and the
> movements that have followed it. For the first time
> since the quiz-show days of Charles van Doren,
> scholars who might have started their careers with
> books on Donne's debt to Plotinus or Trollope's
> comedy of manners saw the chance for something like
> celebrity by turning to the signifying practices of
> Bugs Bunny or 2 Live Crew. (897)

Those scholars who brought a Post-Modern perspective from out of

the circumscribed domain of literature and rhetoric and unto the

wider world of mainstream American consciousness, because of

their ushering in of a rebellious cultural vanguard, existed as,

again, academic rock stars. And who wouldn't want to join their

"band"?

   But let me say this: I neither mean to detract from those

Post-Modern critics and theorists whom I named, as well as those

whom I did not, nor do I mean to devalue their contributions to

the field of composition and rhetoric, whether they are actually

from "Writing" or not. Very much to the contrary. My own

perspective upon writing – my pedagogy, my philosophy of

composition – is utterly informed by them. Very well, I would

not be here, writing about, wrestling with, Uncertainty, yet

again, if it were not for them. I learned immensely not simply

about writing and about thinking but also about living. Because

of them, I was enlightened. I was provoked. I was challenged.

I was inspired. I was liberated. My experience with such

Uncertainty-rooted Post-Modern philosophy would seem to find a

parallel, and interpretation, with Spellmeyer's description of

his own introduction to what he simply calls "theory," an event

that he declares "had given me the means to change nearly

everything about what I did and who I was" ("After Theory" 895).

Of this, he writes:

> [B]ut theory in my life has had far-reaching
> consequences. I acted on the insights theory offered
> me, and my actions touched the lives of many
> thousands of high school graduates whose experience
> at the university might have been more damaging than
> it turned out to be. For an entire generation in
> English studies, I believe, the encounter with theory
> followed a course like the one I have just retraced,
> an odyssey from silence, boredom, and paralysis to a
> sense of purpose and "empowerment," as we used to
> say. (896)

And for Spellmeyer, this "odyssey" left him stirred by a very

definite purpose as a teacher. He explains:

> I recognized more clearly than I ever had before that
> teaching any subject was a self-defeating act unless
> all of those involved could find the means to enlarge
> their particular lifeworlds - worlds that were full
> and real in different ways but equally full and real.
> (896)

Like Spellmeyer, Covino believes that it is writing and the

teaching of writing that can serve those same ends. It is, in

particular, writing that rises from out of a "critical theory"-

influenced perspective that exists as "fundamentally a theory of

discourse that devalues certainty and closure while it

celebrates the generative power of the imagination" (128). For

him, writing that does indeed nurture thought is writing that

not simply welcomes Uncertainty but seeks for it, declaring,

"What writers must maintain is thoughtful uncertainty, the

attitude that necessarily informs full exploration and motivates

wonder" (131). On how to actually engender this "thoughtful

uncertainty" of his in writing, Covino explains:

> I am suggesting that [students] should trade
> certainty for ambiguity, trade preservative writing
> for investigative writing, trade conclusions for
> "counterinduction." The climate is right for writing
> teachers to point out that the world is a drama of
> people and ideas and that writing is how we
> consistently locate and relocate ourselves in the
> play. (130)

This notion of writing, and thinking, being nurtured upon the

Uncertainty that is invoked by the tumult of the confrontation

of different "people and ideas" – "ourselves" thus born and

reborn over and over and over again amidst such a disquieting

and disturbing "drama" – is reiterated by James Berlin in

Rhetoric and Reality. To Berlin, writing is the nexus of

"reality" and "truth" itself and a writer who would have a

greater understanding of them has to understand that they emerge

from out of the Uncertainty of the innumerable exchange of "all

elements of the rhetorical situation: interlocutor, audience,

material reality, and language" (16). Furthermore, a writer who

would have this greater understanding of them has to understand

that they are only as certain as the certainty of the sum of

those boundless "transaction[s]." Of this, he explains:

> All experiences, even the scientific and logical, are
> grounded in language, and language determines their
> content and structure. And just as language
> structures our response to social and political
> issues, language structures our response to the
> material world. Rhetoric thus becomes implicated in
> all human behavior. All truths arise out of
> dialectic, out of the interaction of individuals
> within discourse communities. Truth is never simply
> 'out there' in the material world or the social
> realm, or simply 'in here' in a private and personal
> world. It emerges only as the three – the material,
> the social, and the personal – interact, and the
> agent of mediation is language. (16-7)

In his *College English* essay from a year later, "Rhetoric and
Ideology in the Writing Class," Berlin continues upon the
rhetorical relationship between that "dialectic" and "Truth":

> [S]ince language is a social phenomenon that is a
> product of a particular historical moment, our
> notions of the observing self, the communities in
> which the self functions, and the very structures of
> the material world are social constructions – all
> specific to a particular time and culture. These
> social constructions are thus inscribed in the very
> language we are given to inhabit in responding to our
> experience. […] [I]n studying rhetoric – the ways
> discourse is generated – we are studying the ways in
> which knowledge comes into existence. Knowledge,
> after all, is an historically bound social
> fabrication rather than an eternal and invariable
> phenomenon located in some uncomplicated repository
> […]. (731)

And this knowledge of "knowledge" has very definite social and
political implications, as "arguments based on the permanent
rational structures of the universe or on the evidence of the
deepest and most profound personal institutions *should not be
accepted without question*" (732, emphasis mine). Because of
that, for Berlin, "[t]he material, the social, and the
subjective are at once the producers and the products of

ideology, and ideology must be challenged so as to reveal its economic and political consequences for individuals" (732).

In the same year, C. H. Knoblauch would offer a similar conclusion about the "liberationist" potential upon the social and political and, through them, personal fronts of the Uncertainty that is born out of the dialectical, or, as he refers to it, "dialogical" nature of language and the "language user." In this essay, "Rhetorical Constructions: Dialogue and Commitment," Knoblauch writes:

> [T]he concept of language in dialectical relationship with the concept of language user, each conditioning the other within the contexts of material social reality and historical change. […] The life of language […] is a function of its users, yet its users are themselves constituted by the processes of language as well as by the other material and historical realities that language objectifies. […] The "world" that language presents to its users as an objectified condition both appears to be and is profoundly actual, immediate, material, and enveloping. Yet it is also wholly historical and dynamic, a human product upon which human beings make their impact. (134)

For Knoblauch, the ultimate purpose of this perspective upon, and use of, language is the disciplining of a "critical consciousness," a "self-aware and consciously 'critical' concern that understands the tendency in all social institutions to forget their origins in human activity, to forget their historicity and thereby monumentalize themselves at cost of human life" (135). Put simply, a "critical consciousness" would allow writers, through their writing, to "recogniz[e] our involvement in social reality while resisting wherever necessary

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the tendency of that reality to make us or to make others less

than fully human" (136). I believe Knoblauch defined, with Lil

Brannon, such an end most profoundly in their book, *Rhetorical

Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*, their repudiation of

"classic" rhetoric and celebration of the "modern." When

discussing the influence of the "epistemological crisis of the

seventeenth century" upon the rise of what they call "modern

rhetoric" and its results, they write:

> The natural tendency of discourse is to explore, *to
> progress from what is known to what is not yet known*.
> The process of starting and interrelating assertions
> eventually takes the writer into new intellectual
> territory because it forces experiments in the making
> of connections that have not been made before. […]
> "Creative" writers are creative because they retain
> the imaginative flexibility needed to abandon earlier
> discourses in order to see things in new ways. The
> most powerful learning comes, not from the effort to
> validate some existing state of knowledge (though
> that is a useful activity), but from the discovery of
> a new conception which changes the very dimensions of
> *knowledge*. (72, emphasis mine)

This is a promotion of Uncertainty as the beginning *and* the end

of writing and thinking and learning - and very well better than

I could have offered myself. Without it, it would seem, you are

doing none of the three. Without it, writing exists simply as

"a mechanical act of selecting prefabricated forms of

preconceived content" (4), "a perfunctory, ceremonial exercise,

not designed to discover new learning but only to recapitulate

in decorous prose what people already know" (24). And without

the likes of Berlin and Knoblauch and Brannon and those other

critics and theorists – again, whether named or not - whose work

brought a Post-Modern perspective of "reality" and "knowledge" and "truth" to the field of composition and rhetoric, such a perspective may never have been articulated. As I said before, they utterly changed the course of the conversation about writing and, thereby, the common practice of the teaching of writing.

Or did they?

I would return to those experiences in the writing classroom early in my doctoral work at Stony Brook, which had left me asking myself whether what I had witnessed was indeed what it meant to "write with uncertainty. And so with all that previous hopeful, Uncertainty-subordinate potential in mind – the potential for writing to exist as a way to see the "world," "reality" and "truth," as "a human product upon which human beings make their impact," to stoke "the generative power of the imagination," and "to explore, to progress from what is known to what is not yet known"; the potential for the teaching of writing to exist as a way for student writers to learn that "Truth is never simply 'out there' in the material world or the social realm, or simply 'in here' in a private and personal world," how "knowledge comes into existence," and, thus, help themselves "to enlarge their particular lifeworlds"; and lastly, the potential to help those who would teach writing to gain a "sense of purpose and 'empowerment'" – I again find myself

asking the same question: *What had happened?* What meaning was I to make of what I had witnessed? What separates "education" from "indoctrination" in writing classes like that which I experienced that would raise the banner of Uncertainty in the name of those Post-Modern philosophies of literature and rhetoric? I am reminded of something Kurt Spellmeyer said in his "After Theory" essay, a disheartened statement made after recalling his "odyssey from silence, boredom, and paralysis to a sense of purpose and 'empowerment'": "Yet it seems increasingly obvious now that something went wrong with theory" (896). What happens when Certainty is propagated as Uncertainty, an unintentional "Trojan Horse" that serves to put forth the same old thing all over again?

The most severe critique of those Post-Modern schools of theory and criticism, at least to my reading, comes from C. H. Knoblauch himself as articulated in his "Rhetorical Constructions" essay, with a discussion of the "inevitable limitations" of what he calls the "dialogical or sociological" rhetorical statement, which not only seems to be an applicable exhibitor of those Post-Modern perspectives but also seems to be the school to which Knoblauch's own perspectives find the closest fit, Berlin himself contending, in "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," that he was "moving into the social camp" (730). This aside, Knoblauch writes:

> A peculiar deficiency of the emphasis on dialectic so
> central to a sociological argument is that the
> insistence is *frequently not itself dialectical*;
> indeed, it is as likely as any other to become
> theological, though the privileged deity is now
> neither the god of our forefathers nor the god of the
> laboratory nor the god of consciousness, but instead
> the god of history. This deity is a particularly
> truculent being who necessitates change for the sake
> of change, a turbulent renunciation of the very idea
> of tradition – as in the case, for instance, of Mao's
> Cultural Revolution – all in the interest of
> ideological purity with little consideration of the
> effects of radical change on the human beings who
> must endure it for theory's sake. […] We have
> plentiful enough evidence of the potential for
> inhumanity in contemporary socialist political
> experiments to suggest that Marxist and other
> presumably dialectical arguments nurture the same
> oppressive capacity as any intellectual commitment
> when they *divorce themselves from the dialogue* and
> reconstitute a hierarchy of voices in their own
> favor. (272, emphasis mine)

What Knoblauch is describing is a severe yet straightforward

reversal of perspective. The "Word" of the Judeo-Christian-

Islamic tradition and the very dichotomous, "we-right-good vs.

other-wrong-bad" perspective that it both necessitates and

nurtures has been traded for the "Word" of a secular Post-

Modernity. One "god" has become traded for another, but this

new "god" promises his (or her) disciples the very same boons if

they should worship him: order, stability, authority, and

control. This "trade" is simply a counter-polarization, as it

were, like when you look upon a photograph's negative: the

lights become dark and the darks become light but the thing in

the photograph, whatever it may be, remains the same. Again,

the same old thing all over … again. For Knoblauch, it would

seem that without that "dialogue," your perspective of "reality"

and "truth" simply ends where it began. There is no movement and no change. There is only stagnation.

The utter *certainty* of a Post-Modern-heralded Uncertainty is Certainty. And it is a Certainty that is no less "fixed and immutable," no less "absolute" and "supreme," no matter how sincere and zealous calls for questioning and conflict and opposition and subversion and revolution may be. No matter what philanthropic, egalitarian, and humanitarian ends may be at stake – culturally, socially, politically, economically, and so on and so forth – it is *no* different than those Christian priests telling pagans and heathens, from Britania to Aztlan, from the Congo to Samoa, that their gods and the "realities" and "truth" of their existence, whether in this world or the next, were nothing but lies. When all is said and done, do the "ends" truly justify the "means"? With the situation that Knoblauch is describing, it is still the handing out of those "bricks" of knowledge – prefabricated and predigested – which, to John Dewey, again, was the utter *antithesis* of "education." To Dewey, it amounted to indoctrination.

This is what Maxine Hairston warned of in "Diversity, Ideology, and the Teaching of Writing": the "real danger of [freshman English] being co-opted by the radical left, coerced into acquiescing to methods we abhor because, in the abstract, we have some mutual goals" (187). I referred before to

Hairston's thoughts on how "critical literary theories" were

brought down from English departments to writing classrooms, but

I would look at what she sees as the result of composition

instructors conforming, as it were, to that "need to belong and

be approved by the power structure" (184). Of this, she writes:

> I see a new model emerging for freshman writing
> programs, a model that disturbs me greatly. It's a
> model that puts dogma before diversity, politics
> before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and
> the social goals of the teacher before the education
> needs of the student. It's a regressive model that
> undermines the progress we've made in teaching
> writing. (180)

And Hairston explains her opposition to writing courses becoming

transformed into "political forums" or "social crusades":

> I vigorously object to the contention that
> [teachers] have a right – even a duty – to use their
> classrooms as platforms for their own political
> views. Such claims violate all academic traditions
> about the university being a forum for the free
> exchange of ideas, a place where students can examine
> different points of view in an atmosphere of honest
> and open discussion, and, in the process, learn to
> think critically. […]
> […] Can't any professor claim the right to
> indoctrinate students simply because he or she is
> right? The argument is no different from that of any
> true believers who are convinced that they own the
> truth and thus have the right to force it on others.
> (187)

And her extreme aversion to such a situation is that, if such a

thing occurs, "a correct way to think" reigns through

"intellectual intimidation" and, because of this sort of

atmosphere, there could exist a very real pressure upon students

"to take refuge in generalities and responses that please the

teacher. Such a fake discourse is a kind of silence, the

silence we have so often deplored […]. But when we stifle

creative impulse and make students opt for survival over

honesty, we have done the same thing" (189). Hairston's

conclusion, to put things simply, is that "Authoritarian methods

are still authoritarian methods, no matter what cause they're

invoked" (187). Similar fears of those same scenarios are

expressed by Kurt Spellmeyer, whose critiques of "theory" I also

referenced earlier. For Spellmeyer, that "intellectual

intimidation" and those "authoritarian methods" of Hairston's

breed what he refers to, in "After Theory," as "an

unacknowledged violence," which "precisely because so many

people working in English studies have encountered theory only

as liberating, that hidden legacy has passed unnoticed – and

unredressed" (894). At the heart of Spellmeyer's essay would

seem to be the disparity between the promise of "theory" and the

reality of "theory" – the difference between its theory and

practice, as it were. Of the former, it would seem that it was

something for which he had great hope and from which he took

great inspiration, as my discussion of his "sense of purpose and

'empowerment'" because of it attests. Of the latter, however,

it would seem that his witnessing of it, its

"operationalization," served to dissipate that hope and that

inspiration both. He writes:

> Theory and its successors have taken shape in the
> space opened up by the conflict between our hunger

> for prestige and our loneliness in an age of mass
> communication, yet the purpose of theory as we have
> often practiced it, under a variety of names, is not
> to make intellectual life more open and democratic,
> by enlarging the circle of participants, but rather
> to invest the culture of expertise with an aura of
> unalterable permanence. Theory makes a weapon of
> marginality by reversing the relations of power
> between ourselves and a public inclined to dismiss
> our achievements and concerns out of hand. (897)

For Spellmeyer, it is the "weapon of marginality" that is the root of that "unacknowledged violence" and he uses an essay on "'Breast-Giver,' a short story by the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi," by "practical feminist-Marxist-deconstructionist" literary critical, Gayatri Spivak, as a dramatic example. After offering a sample from Spivak's interpretation, Spellmeyer explains the meaning he makes of the meaning *she* has made of Devi's prose:

> Spivak's rhetoric [...] compels its readers to
> abandon Mahasweta's words in order to wander through
> the labyrinths of Foucault's, Derrida's, Volosinov's,
> and Lacan's. And the result is not emancipation but
> a forced admission on the reader's part that even
> when eminent intellects make very little sense
> indeed, they still somehow think more usefully than
> the ordinary reader ever could. (898)

Upon this, he continues:

> What disappears from Spivak's text is not just the
> reader's world, but also any sense of the world that
> produced Mahasweata's own narrative. And this
> violent act, which destroys and appropriates at the
> same time, is the quintessential gesture of both
> theory and remediation as they are typically
> practiced. In each case, the motive is the same -
> *the maintenance of a boundary between 'ignorance' and
> 'knowledge,' mystification and enlightenment*.
> Constrained as she is by the language of theory,
> Spivak has chosen to be heard at a certain cost to
> others - by speaking the argot of professionals and
> by laying claim to an insight that transcends the
> experience of absolutely everyone except a few
> cognoscenti like the ones she dutifully cites. While

> attempting to make room for the excluded and
> disempowered, the theorist continues to occupy *a*
> *privileged place indistinguishable from the*
> *scientist's role as an objective observer, or from*
> *the philosopher's pretensions to pure reason.* [...]
> Far from breaking with the legacy of colonization,
> this arrangement has simply reinstated it with a
> vengeance, so that the grandchildren of the Asian and
> African subjects who began their schoolday paying
> homage to 'our forefathers the Gauls' now bone up on
> Derrida or Foucault. (899, emphasis mine)

The portrait that Spellmeyer paints here through his appraisal

of "theory" – again, his critique focused upon the use of

"theory" by its "successors" rather than anything inherent to

"theory" itself – is that same counter-polarization that

Knoblauch had himself warned against. The verge of reversal is

that "a boundary between 'ignorance' and 'knowledge,'

mystification and enlightenment" and assuming that "privileged

place" as the bearer and keeper and missionary of that Post-

Modern "Word," those "successors" have indeed become the

preachers and the popes of that new "theology," as Knoblauch had

called it, of Uncertainty. And their standing as such has been

assured by their criticism and scholarship and the abstractions

and abstruseness therein, their work bringing them that very

same order, stability, authority, and control, at least within

the world of academia. And this is all in the name of

Uncertainty, which, at least for me, is an utterly ironic thing.

But it is a grievously unfortunate irony because its

consequences are not suffered by those like me – fellow

composition instructors and composition scholars – but by

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students, students under the tutelage of those "successors" of Post-Modernity and the schools of theory and criticism that it gave rise to who, very well out of their zealous belief in the justness of their perspectives and philosophies, put forth Uncertainty as an undeniable and unremitting "Truth." It is upon the heads and the shoulders of those students that this weight of the certainty of that Post-Modern Uncertainty inevitably falls.

How do I try to explain that unfortunate irony: Certainty promoted in the guise of Uncertainty? Perhaps two distinctions have to be made. First, like Spellmeyer, it is not Uncertainty itself about which my suspicions have become raised but its "successors": those who would bring it to their classrooms and the students sitting, and writing, in them. Second, is this reversal of perspective indeed the case, widespread yet unheeded, like Hairston and Spellmeyer would seem to suggest in their essays or is it simply a possibility, something that *can* happen if that something like that "dialogue" or "dialectic" that C. H. Knoblauch seems to hold as utterly critical is not consciously and deliberately provoked? I lean towards the latter here, in particular because I have not undertaken some exhaustive study of writing classes that are constructed upon a perspective of "reality" and "truth" rooted in Uncertainty and a philosophy of education and writing flowing from it. With this

said, I would pose another question: how do you *avoid* that possibility from becoming a reality then?

I believe I found an answer that resonated strongly with me in a very unlikely place. Before, I had said that, according to common portraits of the history of composition and rhetoric, Uncertainty is said to have come to the field with the Post-Modern Age. However, while there was no doubt a flourishing of those schools of thought within academia during this time, some composition and rhetoric theorists see that Uncertainty was *inherent* to rhetoric from rhetoric's very inception, with the founding works of the Greeks and Romans. In *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing*, Knoblauch and Brannon severely criticized this so-called "classical" rhetoric – perhaps more so any contemporary uses of its various theories and methods - as an antiquated disseminator of a "a long-discarded worldview" (4), of "ancient assumptions about knowledge, learning, and discourse" (17), that is a veritable anathema to those teachers of writing who would become "open-minded and reflective." In particular, their greatest problem with any continued reliance upon classical rhetoric is that "classrooms continue to attempt artificial resuscitation of a view of composition long ago separated from the epistemological atmosphere that had once supported it" (23). For them, with such rhetoric, "[t]he point of expression was to preserve and

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celebrate and communicate the truth by decking it in ceremonial garb, the various formulas and ornamental designs of public discourse, whether spoken or written" (23) and, furthermore, "ideas exist prior to language, […] content of a discourse is wholly independent from its form, […] knowledge is fixed and stable, the possession of a master who passes it on to students, and […] writing is largely a ceremonial act" (23-4). In the end, classical rhetoric should be left to molder in antiquity because its perspective that "writing is merely a vehicle for transmitting the known to those who don't yet know" (24) was utterly incompatible with this Post-Modern Age, which not only welcomes but celebrates the not wholly known – Uncertainty.

But other rhetorical theorists also with their critical eye upon rhetorical theories of the classical era and an importing of them to contemporary classrooms would seem to disagree vigorously with Knoblauch and Brannon's appraisal. In her book *The Methodical Memory*, the crux of Sharon Crowley's re-interpretation and re-evaluation of classical rhetoric would seem to rest with "invention," which, "[f]rom a practical point of view […] can be defined as the division of rhetoric that supplies speakers and writers with instructions for finding the specific arguments that are appropriate to a given rhetorical situation" (2). However, for Crowley, it is much more significant to rhetoric than that. For her:

> From [a theoretical] point of view, invention
> becomes the study of all possible means by which
> arguments or proofs can be discovered and developed.
> Rhetoricians develop theories of invention when they
> focus on questions about how people may be persuaded
> to accept something worthy of belief. […]
> And so theories of rhetorical invention must
> also be articulated with current thinking about how
> people change their minds or make discoveries – that
> is, with some currently accepted theory of knowledge.
> (2)

And this question of "how people change their minds or make

discoveries" which is so critical to invention but also

classical rhetoric as a whole is indicative, for Crowley, of the

perspective upon "knowledge," upon "reality" and "Truth," that

was essential to classical rhetoric. Unlike how it was

portrayed by Knoblauch and Brannon, for classical rhetoricians,

knowledge was not simply waiting out in the aether to be

discovered - "fixed and stable, the possession of a master who

passes it on to students" – but was something that was *made*. It

was something that was made through the encounter and conflict

and discourse. Of this, Crowley writes:

> In classical epistemology, wise persons were those
> who had thought long and hard about the cultural
> assumptions that influenced their lives and those of
> other persons. In turn, their shared wisdom became
> part of communal knowledge. Knowledge itself was
> always changing its shape, depending on who was doing
> the knowing. Every act of knowing influenced the
> body of knowledge itself. (162)

And upon this rooting of rhetoric in such an epistemology that

is anything but "fixed and immutable," Crowley explains:

> People need rhetoric precisely because they disagree;
> people disagree because their circumstances differ.
> Rhetoric functions where difference is assumed.
> Differences exist between rhetors and their audiences

> as well as among members of a given audience.
> Rhetors and audiences bring different backgrounds,
> aspirations, and assessments of the current state of
> affairs to any rhetorical situation. If there were
> no differences of this kind at all, rhetoric would
> not be necessary. (167)

Although this is Crowley's general definition of rhetoric, it is

an ideal that is definitely based upon the classical model, and,

because of that emphasis upon "difference," it is an ideal that

is defined by Uncertainty, whether Crowley names it as such or

not. Regardless, this theory of classical rhetoric having

origins in Uncertainty is also shared by William Covino, as

articulated in his book *The Art of Wondering*. For Covino, the

realities of classical rhetoric – the realities of the

epistemology that informs classical rhetoric – has fallen victim

to century after century (after century) of interpretation, each

undertaken to suit the particular rhetorical needs of the time

and each drawing classical rhetoric's techniques and methods

further and further away from its original defining perspective

of "reality" and "truth." As Covino explains:

> [T]here are differences that distinguish the
> pedagogical use of classical rhetoric from age to
> age; however, a common emphasis prevails, upon
> rhetoric as technique. In the *Gorgias* and the
> *Phaedrus*, Plato opens the contest between
> philosophical and technical rhetoric, and the
> technical rhetoric remains dominant through the
> centuries, so that the history of rhetoric is a
> continually stronger refutation of the suppleness of
> discourse, a progressive denial of the ambiguity of
> language and literature, a more and more powerful
> repression of contextual variables by textual
> authority. (8)

It was this "technical rhetoric" that branched off from classical rhetoric, it would seem, that earned Knoblauch and Brannon's criticisms. However, it is Covino's intention with his book to unveil that "philosophical rhetoric" that has become forgotten or ignored over time. To that end, he offers reinterpretations of the defining works of those rhetoricians who represent the "classical" tradition, with the hopes that such a rereading will remove them from that limited and limiting definition of "technical rhetoric."

Covino begins with Plato and it is that discussion that I would focus upon here. For Covino, all of the disparate readings that have been offered of Plato's *Phaedrus* are a testimonial to that Greek philosopher's willful attempts to confuse his work's readers by filling it with inexplicable ambiguities. He explains:

> Commentary on the *Phaedrus* writes a history of confusion. Since Antiquity, those engaged and seduced by the dialogue ask the urgent question, "What is it about?'" […] The critical urgency to locate a unifying subject or purpose in the *Phaedrus* sets aside the *irresolute complexity* that informs philosophical rhetoric and writing for Plato. Reducing the conceptual and personal drama of this dialogue to academic summary follows the tendency to read philosophical rhetoric as a digest of information, as a taxonomy of instructions, and thus effectively discounts the striking *ambiguity* of form and meaning that makes philosophy (and rhetoric) possible and necessary. (10, emphasis mine)

Covino compares those attempts to "locate a unifying subject or purpose in the *Phaedrus*" and thus capture its meaning with certainty to the misunderstandings of Phaedrus, Socrates'

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interlocutor in the work, writing, "Understanding the *Phaedrus*

as a unified system of discourse principles, or as a lesson

about love or wisdom or beauty, we mimic the limitations of

Phaedrus himself, the boy who would rather acquire and memorize

facts and concepts than ask questions" (13). Because of that

failure to control the *Phaedrus* as "unified system of discourse

principles," Covino reads Plato's work, the tortuous discourse

between Plato's Socrates and Phaedrus, as a first-hand

representation of the philosopher's suspicion of the rhetor

whose "writing […] provokes (or means to provoke) certainty and

clarity" (18) and faith in "the man who acknowledges the

dangerous 'playfulness' of writing, playfulness which invites

rather than silences the questioning of the philosopher" (18).

Because of this, Covino declares:

> Given the condemnation of clarity and certainty in
> writing, both in the words of Socrates and in the
> variegated form of the dialogue, we should be less
> disposed to regard the *Phaedrus* as a tissue of
> information than as a collection of prompts to
> further discourse, as the interplay of ambiguities,
> the stuff of philosophy. (18-9)

Covino concludes his rereading of Plato's *Phaedrus* with his

interpretation of its essential "meaning":

> The "right" use of writing, as a reminder "of what we
> know already" means enlarging the field of inquiry,
> which is what this passage and the entire dialogue
> are "about." Faced with placing the *Phaedrus* in
> intellectual history, and moved by its statements on
> rhetoric and writing to form particular conclusions
> on those issues, we find ourselves wondering what the
> dialogue is about, only to realize, once we abandon
> the extraction of lessons and principles, that
> "about" may be reconsidered [...] as a verb, as a

> synonym for doing or making as in "out and about."
> In this sense, the *Phaedrus* is about the art of
> wondering, about rhetoric and writing and reading as
> play with an expanding horizon. (21)

Again, as with Crowley's "invention," Covino's "philosophical rhetoric" exhibited by Plato's *Phaedrus* does not seem fit the "classical rhetoric" critiqued by Knoblauch and Brannon. It is, in fact, a whole other thing. If anything, it would seem to complement the sort of "reflective" and "philosophical" rhetoric that they would seek to promote. Covino does not witness Plato promoting a rhetoric whose purpose is "to preserve and celebrate and communicate the truth by decking it in ceremonial garb, the various formulas and ornamental designs of public discourse," but, very much to the contrary, the active construction of "truth" – "philosophic truth – gained through participation in discourse" (18). For Covino, and seemingly for Plato through him, "truth" is found not with where you end your travels but with the travels themselves, so to speak. It is born from the pursuit of questions and ambiguities and their "living and open inquiry" (11). It is born from Uncertainty.

This discussion of the Uncertainty inherent to the epistemology of classical rhetoric, unveiled from beneath accusations to the contrary by Crowley and Covino, was an admittedly somewhat indirect way to arrive at an answer to that question I posed before: how do you avoid Certainty privileged and propagated in the guise of Uncertainty? I believe I found

some understanding with Jasper Neel's *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*, which bridges Antiquity and Post-Modernity, "classical rhetoric" and "critical avant-garde theory," criticizing both through criticisms of Plato and Derrida, the fathers, as it were, of the classical rhetoric and the Post-Modern. My introduction to Neel's book occurred back when I was working towards my Master's. I had asked Bob Whitney, the professor of that "Rhetorical Theory and the Teaching of Writing" class and my former mentor, where he had read about, learned about, his campaign to "write with uncertainty." He told me about Jasper Neel's *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*. While I bought the book at the time, it sat on a shelf for almost ten years until I finally opened it for this present undertaking. When I did finally read it, I found within its pages if not "the" answer than a resonant "an" answer. As a whole, Neel's book is an attempt to theorize "a new sort of writing" that turns its back (or tries to turn its back) upon the epistemological roots in the philosophies of both Plato and Derrida. He defines it as:

> [A] rhetorical writing that quite self-consciously
> admits its own rhetoricity and carefully delineates
> the ethical ramifications of its operation at all
> times. […] For the strong discourse I advocate […]
> to occur, the writer and the speaker must escape the
> binary opposition between idealism and deconstruction
> and begin to write - an act that encompasses and
> exceeds both Plato and Derrida. (xiii)

Because of this, Neel's book is separated into two parts: the first deals with Plato and the second with Derrida. Of the

former I will not really pay much attention, not because it does not hold any meaning for me but because it does not hold any meaning for me *here*. Of the latter, my basic interest is not with Neel's interpretation of Derrida's fundamental theories of language and discourse but, curiously enough, with Neel's interpretation of Derrida's interpretation of Plato. It is there that I believe you can witness at work the Certainty of a supposed Uncertainty wrestling with the Uncertainty of a supposed Certainty. But in order to explore such a thing, I would offer the briefest summary of the conclusions Neel arrives at with his reading of Plato.

In that first part of *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*, Neel interprets Plato's *Phaedrus* as "reducible to an aporia – a set of gaps, dead ends, complexities, and contradictions so entangled as to render the text if not void at least so undecidable as to disregardable" (5), exemplified by the fact that the Greek philosopher set down his condemnation of writing, "effectively exclud[ing] writing from the highest forms of thinking, understanding, and communicating" (3), *in writing*. And like Covino, Neel sees this as an utterly *purposeful* thing, explaining that "[R]eaders who take *Phaedrus* seriously find themselves in the system of Platonic philosophy, a system that always promises final revelation of truth [but that] denies access to writing [which would] reveal the truth of the system's

own operation" (71). Because of this, "Plato's text can be complete only if we agree to forego writing, thus making ourselves permanently inadequate, for completion exists only outside the writing process" (71). However, despite Plato's purpose for his *Phaedrus*, Neel asserts that, very well because of how the work has been read - or misread - another definition of rhetoric, a perspective of writing that does indeed attempt to put forward a "final revelation of truth," has become Plato's real inheritance by Western culture. Of this, he explains what such an inheritance "could have been":

> Writing could have been introduced to the West as a celebration of endless possibility. It could have opened the ultimate mode of democracy because it allows everyone the time and the place to discover the rhetoricity of whatever text presents itself as the closure of truth. The first thing the writer learns is the impossibility of writing to close itself down in truth. The only real possibility for a *philosopher-king* to rule is in an oral society where there are no writers to reveal the king's essentially rhetorical nature, where there are no writers to reveal that the king, who presents himself as possessing the knowledge of philosophy, was made up in writing and could have been made up in an infinite number of other ways. (73, emphasis mine)

For Neel, however, what the West did indeed inherit from Plato and the *Phaedrus* was a rhetoric that was the quintessential tool of he (or she) who would pose as the "philosopher-king," bearer of the "Truth," a "truth" that is "fixed and immutable," "fixed and stable, the possession of a master who passes it on to students." This notion of the "philosopher-king" is crucial to my understanding of that question I posed before: how do you

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avoid Certainty put forward as Uncertainty? It is crucial

because it not only bridges Plato and Derrida but, through this,

is what Derrida, that forerunner of Uncertainty, comes to appear

to be after Neel's exploration of Derrida's criticism of Plato

　　　Before I turn to that criticism of Plato by Derrida, I

would establish Neel's reading of what is possibly the most

important constituent concept of Derrida's deconstructive

perspective upon language, writing, and "truth": Derrida's

concept of "différance." Neel defines it as "neither absence

nor presence. It is a constant movement of spacing that, by

appearing nowhere, plays absence and presence against each

other. It 'is the systematic play of differences, of the traces

of differences, of the spacing by means of which elements are

related to each other […]'" (158). By doing so, Derrida

professes that his différance has an utterly subversive

potential, Neel quoting him from *Margins* as saying,

"[D]ifferance instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which

makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by

everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past and future

presence of a kingdom" (159). Of how the threat of différance

to this "kingdom" of "Truth," this "kingdom" of Certainty,

affects, or can affect, student writers and their writing, Neel

explains:

> While writing may promise […] a kingdom where
> students learn to master what they "know," in fact,

> it leads the writer into a labyrinth, into an
> unending adventure. Students want writing to do all
> the things that différance precludes. They want it
> to be a governable structure whose origin in meaning
> remains always clear. […]
> […]
>   Getting students to conceive of writing as a
> weaving rather than an arresting of meaning […] is no
> mean feat. […] They want us to give them the skill
> to stop the weaving, to cut the lines that trace
> outwards, to break the knots where their meaning ties
> up with other meanings beyond their control and even
> beyond their comprehension. (160-61)

Neel's descriptions of "what students expect" - writing as "a totalization of knowledge, a closed feat waiting to be performed" where there exist "[n]o questions, no uncertainty, no différance" - should be very, *very* familiar by now. It is the same urge, the same compulsion, that spurs forth John Dewey's "quest for certainty" and what Neel describes as students' "cry for tyranny, a cry for monarchy saying, OK, you be the monarch, I'll be the subject" (159) is the cry for salvation from the ambiguous and the foreign, the unknown and the ineffable – from Uncertainty. It is the cry for "theology" about which Knoblauch had written, a church of seeing and thinking and writing whose "toalization of knowledge" was as a bastion against "questions" and "différance" – against Uncertainty. It is the cry for the "philosopher-king" of Plato's, reigning from within Derrida's "kingdom." But with Neel's interpretation of Derrida's interpretation of Plato, Derrida would seem to step forth and *answer* those cries.

Derrida's purpose for "deconstructing" Plato is to deconstruct Western rhetoric and, through it, the West's perspective upon "reality" and "truth." As Neel writes, "Derrida sees Platos' depreciation of writing in *Phaedrus* and the 'Seventh Letter' as the inaugural move in the entire history of Western metaphysics" (184). After recounting how Derrida undertakes such a thing, Neel explains what meaning he makes of those proceedings from *Of Grammatology*. Neel writes:

> By showing that truth exists only in its absence, that metaphors operate both by representing inexactly and by playing infinitely, in short, by showing the problems that language creates, Derrida hasn't deconstructed *Phaedrus*. At best, he has (1) merely outlined some of the complexities that Plato obviously knew he had to deal with, (2) destroyed the ground on which a naive reading that seeks the closure of truth in *Phaedrus* could be built, and thus (3) described the ever-open dialectic nature of the process of reading Phaedrus, a process that surely would not have surprised Plato, this consummate writer who hid himself everywhere in his texts. (193-4)

Despite all of this, however, according to Neel, "['Plato's Pharmacy'] believes itself capable of asserting control over Plato's text" (194). He claims that, "[T]hough [Derrida] claims to have shown how Plato's text exceeds Plato's control, Derrida himself appears calmly in control of his own text, almost to the point of complacency" (193). Derrida's very certain denial of Plato's authorial control while, at the very same time, not so subtly announcing his very own is an utter irony that, for Neel, is very telling. Upon this, he explains:

> Derrida clearly knows what his text is going to
> say. He expects no surprises (though, no doubt, he
> expects us to be surprised) *as he presents the
> controlled meaning that is everywhere present and
> under control in his own essay.*
> […]
> Thus, Derrida's text, which he compares to a
> military campaign through Plato's territory […]
> claims throughout to manifest what Hartman calls
> totalization, the ability of the meaning a text
> carries to be everywhere present and under control in
> every part of the text. Yet Derrida uses this
> totalization to reveal the inability of all other
> writers to achieve such totalization. Derrida's
> belief that he can *totalize and control* in his text
> the ways other writers fail to totalize and control
> their texts operates as *a sort of theology, almost a
> dogma.* (194-5, emphasis mine)

For Neel, the reader must concede to Derrida's overwhelming

claims of revelation - or not. It is utterly black or white.

As Neel writes, "Derrida can no more prove this belief than

Plato can present the truth. One must either accept it or

reject it theologically" (196). Because of this, it allows for

a situation that resurrects that "Word" of the Western world and

its "we-right-good vs. other-wrong-bad" perspective, although

here under the Post-Modern aegis of différance – of Uncertainty.

By his own theories, Derrida's différance would bring about the

"subversion of every kingdom" and dethrone every "philosopher-

king," undoing the epistemology of the West, its dichotomous

perspective of "reality" and "truth," in the process. However,

according to this re-reading of Neel's, Derrida's différance

simply remains an abstracted ideal because what he does through

his analysis of the *Phaedrus* is to, again, counter-polarize that

perspective, thus re-establishing Certainty. There is no

"subversion" and there is no "dethroning." There is, yet again, the same old thing all over again. And because of that, Derrida stands over Plato's *Phaedrus* as Plato's own "philosopher-king," which is, for me, an irony of ironies.

But the question may arise, "What of it?" Some years ago now, someone introduced me to a proverb, attributed to ninth century Buddhist teacher Li Chin, that changed my life and very well saved it: "If you meet the Buddha in the road, kill him." What it has meant to me is this: if you are confronted with *the* "Answer" or *the* "Truth," it should be avoided because it is nothing but a lie. It is a lie because no such thing exists. Because of my admitted "love" for Certainty, I have to remind myself of this now and again. And as a teacher – in my circumstances, a teacher of writing - "Buddha" could be replaced with "philosopher-king." As a teacher of writing or a scholar of writing or both, if you should come upon some philosopher of rhetoric or critical theorist or their theories or philosophies that are presented as *the* "Answer" or *the* "Truth," it should be avoided. It should be "killed."   As a teacher of writing, a teacher of writing such as myself or Spellmeyer or Covino or Neel, who is stirred and inspired by a Post-Modern perspective of "reality" and "truth," you have to avoid engendering this perspective in such a way that it verges upon the "fixed and immutable," the "absolute" and "supreme," that conceives of

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"knowledge" as, again, the "possession of a master [passed] on to students." Uncertainty must remain Uncertain or else it "subverts" itself – "kills" itself. In short, you have to avoid *becoming* the "philosopher-king." You have to avoid *becoming*, as Neel writes, "the know-it-all who has seen the True and come to tell us about it." In a sense, you must become like Plato's Socrates. "In seeking the right, the beautiful, and the good, in thinking of truth as possibility, Plato's Socrates inaugurates *a method that forever holds everything open to question*. No system, no belief, no action can escape Socrates' dialectical scrutiny" (200-1, emphasis mine). It is very simple advice. However, at the same time, it is very difficult advice to adhere to. But I believe a key to getting there is that concept of "dialectical scrutiny," of that "dialogue" of which Knoblauch had written. Because of the "dialectic" or the "dialogue," Uncertainty is watched and stoked like a flame. And with that, I turn to my next chapter where I would explore how that "dialectic" and that "dialogue" could happen. To do so, particular attention is offered to how I have attempted that "dialectic" in my very own writing classroom, my theory and practice therein defined, perhaps not surprisingly, by the work of John Dewey, Peter Elbow, and William Perry.

IV.

    As a teacher, how *do* you not become the "philosopher-king,"
"the know-it-all who has seen the True and come to tell us about
it"? How do you avoid possessing - and becoming possessed by -
the "True" of Certainty and the "True" of Uncertainty, both of
them no less "fixed and immutable," no less "absolute and
unshakeable," than the other for those who would wave their flag
and worship at their altar? As I have tried to explore and
explain throughout this until now, neither extreme is fruitful.
As I have tried to say, the pursuit and perpetuation of either,
to the willed exclusion of the other, is detrimental. Western
Civilization – religion, science, politics, rhetoric, and other
defining features of Western Civilization - arose out of that
privileging, the privileging of a severely dualistic way of
perceiving "Truth" and "reality," it is true. Because it was
static and universal in its utter Certainty, that Western vision
was extremely strong and influential and enduring. But despite
this, this black or white perspective, in the end, is indeed
detrimental when it comes to seeing new sights, dreaming new
dreams, and telling new tales. It is detrimental to, as, again,
Hélène Cixous wrote, "understanding the incomprehensible, facing
the invisible, hearing the inaudible, thinking the unthinkable,
which is of course: thinking."

And the same can be said, and has been said, for the
perspective born out of the Certainty of Uncertainty with the
dawning of Post-Modernity, where, as C. H. Knoblauch had
claimed, "the privileged deity is now neither the god of our
forefathers nor the god of the laboratory nor the god of
consciousness, but instead the god of history." And so upon
this epistemological frontier, as it were, laid out between
these two extremes of perspective that are Certainty and
Uncertainty, how do you, and I, exist as a thinker, as a writer,
as a teacher? How do you exist amidst the pull of those two
opposite forces so that it fosters the "reflective thinking" of
John Dewey – the "[a]ctive, persistent, and careful
consideration of any belief or supported form of knowledge" that
comes from "overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept
suggestions at their face value […] [and the] willingness to
endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance" (13) - or
the "relativistic pragmatism" of William Perry - the
"perceiv[ing] [of] all knowledge and values (including
authority's) as contextual and relativistic and subordinates
dualistic right-wrong functions to the status of a special case,
in context" (9-10), eventually culminating with "experience[ing]
the affirmation of identity among multiple responsibilities and
realiz[ing] Commitment as an ongoing, unfolding activity" (10)"
- these two concepts that most resemble, philosophically, that

urge to "write with Uncertainty," that still as yet unrealized

ideality? Uncertainty, the "perplexity" of Dewey's, the

"question to be answered, […] ambiguity to be resolved" (*How We*

Think 11) that is the impetus for reflective inquiry, and

Certainty, the "Commitment" of Perry's in the face of "all the

plurality of the relative world – truths, relationships,

purposes, activities, cares […] requir[ing] the courage of

responsibility, and presuppose[ing] an acceptance of human

limits, including the limits of reason" (135), even if it is not

some unchanging finality but rather, again, "an ongoing,

unfolding activity" that "must be made and remade in time and at

deeper levels" (38): how do you exist within the tension that

exists between these two gravitational poles so that neither

reigns over thinking and writing and teaching as the veritable

"Word" or the "True"?

I found the suggestion of a possibility towards the end of

Neel's *Plato, Derrida, and Writing* with his advice to "[w]riters

who remain rhetoricians" for how to work amidst the similar

tension exerted by the almost contradictory influences of Plato

and Derrida. I won't return to Neel's estimation of the

significance of each of them to Western rhetoric or his

critiques of their seminal theories or to what Neel saw as the

significance of that estimation and critique. It is enough to

say that, in many ways, while it is impossible to nail down, so

to speak, either Plato or Derrida as a bastion of either

Uncertainty or Certainty because, at least according to Neel's

readings, the attribution changes with a turn from a stated

intention to a deep reading, a privileging of one without the

other is no less detrimental than the privileging of Certainty

at the expense of Uncertainty, or vice-versa. Without the two,

rhetoric is unwhole. To that end, Neel contends:

> Writers who give in to Plato in effect cease to be
> writers and become philosophers on a quest that will
> never produce any inscription at all, a quest that
> requires writers constantly to admit abashedly that
> they do not know the truth. Writers who give in to
> Derrida become philosophers who never finish
> unworking all those discourses that conceal or remain
> ignorant of their own written rhetoricity […].
> Writers who remain rhetoricians, in contrast, keep
> both Plato and Derrida at work at all times during
> the composing process, but forever subordinate them
> to that process so that neither the Platonic search
> for truth nor the Derridean strategy of
> deconstruction overwhelms the process. (203)

For Neel, those "gravitational poles" of Plato and Derrida must

always be present in the thinking and writing of "writers who

remain rhetoricians." With this, I hear him suggesting a

balance: not too much of a allegiance to Plato or Derrida lest

one "overwhelms the process." But if we continue that analogy I

had tried to establish between Perry and Dewey and Certainty and

Uncertainty, does this mean that the answer to my earlier

questions is that this pairing must *also* be "at work at all

times" as well – with teaching and with writing and with

thinking? Must a balance be struck between them as well? I

would turn to Peter Elbow for an answer. In the introduction to

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his book *Embracing Contraries*, he explains not simply the origin

of his present work but the origin of his pedagogy:

> A hunger for coherence; yet a hunger also to be true
> to the natural incoherence of experience. This
> dilemma has led me […] to work things out in terms of
> contraries: *to gravitate toward oppositions and even*
> *to exaggerate differences* – while also tending to
> notice how both sides of the opposition must somehow
> be right. My instinct has thus made me seek ways to
> avoid the limitations of the single point of view.
> (x, emphasis mine)

With this as the motivation and the guiding principal not simply

for his book but for his philosophy of writing and the teaching

of writing as a whole, the essays that comprise *Embracing*

Contraries all deal with those titular "contraries," the

"opposite extremes" and "polar opposition[s]" experienced with

thinking and writing and teaching, and the question of how to

work with them separately *and* together. Somewhat early in the

book, he offers a very simple piece of advice: "keep yourself

from being caught in the middle" (48-9). Following this caveat,

Elbow, in the chapter "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching

Process," offers up the notion of "middling." When discussing

the "contradictory" positions teachers can take with their

students, he writes:

> [W]e can take a merely judicious, compromise position
> toward our students only if we are willing to settle
> for being *sort of* committed to students and *sort of*
> committed to subject matter and society. This
> middling or fair stance, in fact, is characteristic
> of many teachers who lack investment in teaching or
> who have lost it. Most invested teachers, on the
> other hand, tend to be a bit more passionate about
> supporting students or else passionate about serving
> and protecting the subject matter they love – and

thus they tend to live more on one side or the other
                    of some allegedly golden mean. (145)

For Elbow, this "sort of" strategem that is "middling" –

"[M]idling. Muddling. Not excellence or passion in either

direction" (145) – whether consciously employed or not, is not a

way to truly wrestle with "contraries" but simply a way to *avoid*

the uncomfortable tension aroused by their polar opposition: to

fool yourself into ignoring that tension – that conflict and

that struggle - through the illusion of some "happy medium."

Because of this, neither side, neither "opposite extreme" or

"polar opposition," is served. Neither is utilized. Neither is

"embraced." This "middling" that Elbow warns those who would be

writers or teachers of writing away from is, for all intents,

balance and, as a consequence, his warning still applies for the

simple fact that balance is "compromise." In an attempt to be

"fair" to those "contraries," the result could be anything but

"fair" because that attempt at balance, that "sort of,"

"middling" tenor, is a *cheat*. It is an easy out, so to speak,

that is no less detrimental than what I had tried to portray in

the past two chapters: a black or white, "either/or" devotion

to the one and rejection of the other. According to Elbow, to

"sort of" pursue Certainty and "sort of" pursue Uncertainty

would be to pursue *neither* of them. Because of this, balance is

not the answer. In fact, it would seem that Elbow's judgment of

"middling" is written across the face of the universe, upon the

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biochemical workings of the human body and, deeper still, the

very atoms of creation, as "balance," in the end, is simply not

a natural thing.

At least how it is commonly defined, "balance" is not

natural. It does not exist. Yes, if a box level is put upon a

shelf that is being hung, the bubble within the little yellow

window will indicate where it should be so that things placed

upon the shelf won't slide one way more than the other. It is,

technically, "balanced." And a checkbook, a diet, or even a set

of tires: these can all be "balanced" too. But beyond these

superficialities, this definition that would portray "balance"

as static, continual and unchanging once struck, does not hold.

It is not so simply achieved - not even with a box level. As

Andrew Weil states, "Balance is truly a mystery" (49) and, from

out of his alternative medicine perspective, he would offer a

very different definition. To that end, he writes: "In […]

complex systems, equilibriums are not static but dynamic, forged

anew from moment to moment out of constantly changing

conditions" (50). About the concept of "dynamic equilibrium,"

he continues:

> The rates of [dynamic equilibrium] depend on
> the nature of the substances, their molecular
> concentrations and physical states, as well as on
> temperature, pressure, and the presence or absence of
> catalysts. Once equilibrium is reached, the
> concentrations of the reacting substances remain
> constant, *but this situation is not static*. Rather,
> the forward reaction and the reverse reaction are
> taking place at equal velocities, with compounds

breaking apart and reforming continuously. The
equilibrium is dynamic, giving the appearance of
rest, while based on *constant change*.
     The balance of health is also dynamic. The
elements and forces making up a human being and the
changing environmental stresses impinging on them
constitute a system so elaborate as to be
unimaginable in its complexity. We are islands of
change in a sea of change […]. That equilibrium
occurs even for an instant in such a system is
miraculous, yet most of us are most healthy most of
the time, our mind-bodies always trying to keep up
with the incredible balancing act demanded by all the
stresses from inside and out. (51, emphasis mine).

Because of his criticism of what he terms "scientific medicine"

with its fetishism of Certainty and its resulting mission to

"describe, predict, and control the phenomenal world" (258) in

the name of apprehending the "ultimate truth" of human

existence, it is no surprise, then, that Weil should have this

more complicated view of "balance" – "dynamic equilibrium," with

its back and forth surging and its unending change and its

yielding to "mystery" or the unknown – at the very heart of his

perspective upon human health. Again, at least according to

Weil, "balance" of the sort that Elbow had deemed, unfavorably,

as "middling" does not exist down amidst the very deepest

workings of human physiology.

    If we further the intensity of our pretend microscopy and

we examine, beneath skin and bone and blood, the very smallest

and fundamental constituents of the 110 elements, the very atoms

themselves, we would find the same thing there as well. Another

thing you learn further along in college chemistry is that, even

with the densest, most unyielding of matter, from natural stone to man-made steel, their basic atoms, while bonded together with almost inconceivable force, are not themselves "balanced," not if "balance" is, again, defined as "middling" - static and stagnant. Because of what is known as "atomic vibration," those atoms are constantly moving and, thus, constantly moving out of equilibrium with each other. While the molecules and the greater matter of which they are a part do not change, they, the atoms, are themselves constantly changing. At any given second - or infinitesimal fragment of a second - the molecular structure does not look exactly the same because the atoms themselves are not the same. As a result, while those molecules and that greater matter may look inanimate – indeed even dead – to that so-called "naked eye," the reality is very different, as their existence is utterly dynamic. Their flux is without end. As Weil said of humanity, the atoms too are "islands of change in a sea of change." They too know no "balance."

And beyond the physical reality of biology and chemistry and physics, "balance" is not a thing known to a nonphysical or metaphysical reality – a "spiritual" reality – either. While I believe in no gods and no supernatural causes veiled beneath existence, I do find religions fascinating, as metaphorical interpretations of humanity's perception of the natural world and of natural phenomenon. In particular, I find fascinating

the similarities between the venerated archetypes and mystical symbols that can be witnessed among religions spanning disparate geography and time. An example of this is the ancient sun wheel - the swastika. Before it was perverted, unfortunately beyond reformation, in the 1930s by the occult-consumed offenses of the national socialist Third Reich in Germany, the swastika had been used for tens of thousands of years as a symbol of good luck and well being. While its very first use dates back to the Neolithic Age, at the end of what is known as the "Stone Age," the swastika became widespread by the dawn of the Bronze Age, around four millennia before the birth of Jesus Christ (Helmkamp 51). The swastika was used - upon weapons and pottery and jewelry and the thresholds of holy places – by the Hindu, Buddhists, the Greeks and Romans, Celts, Goths, the Norse, Anglo-Saxons, the Baltics and Slavs, Mayans, Aztecs, and even pre-Columbian "Indian" tribes of America (53). This very curious ubiquity – again, spanning geography and spanning time – begs the question, for me, of what meaning it had for those who would chisel, paint, or carve its likeness into things they held dear.

Utterly powerful in its sheer simplicity, the swastika was a symbol very much like the yin yang of the Chinese Taoist tradition: a visual embodiment of the union of polar opposites in the natural world and the greater universe. The yin and yang

are, as LuMing Mao explains in his article, "Returning to Yin
and Yang: From Terms of Opposites to Interdependence-in-
Difference," "two major cosmological concepts in the history of
Chinese science and philosophy" (W46) and, as such, the
relationship between these polar opposites speaks of
"interdependence and interpenetration where one necessarily
depends on, but remains distinctly different from, the other"
(W49). It is a union of "contraries": the deeply fundamental
need of those opposites for each other and the ever-changing,
dynamic, nature of that union. Because of this, while the yin
and the yang may appear "balanced," this is not the case
because, although they do comprise a whole, there is no
"middling" between the yin and the yang. The former flourishes
and the latter lies fallow, but, because their marriage is
defined by the same "dynamic equilibrium" of which Weil wrote,
that situation is not static, not unchanging. There is ebb and
there is flow.

The swastika is no different. While it is not a symbol of
a thusly dynamic dualism because of its four arms, it is,
nevertheless, an ideogram speaking, across mountains and oceans
and across thousands upon thousands of years, of not simply the
universe and of existence but of the *nature* of these – the
nature of the "contraries" that constitute these. With those
four hooked arms of the swastika and sometimes in left-facing

and right-facing pairs, it symbolized, among other things, day
and night, life and death, masculinity and femininity, the four
seasons, the four winds, the four elements, and the four phases
of Ursa Major. Within all of these unions, one of the
"contraries" begets and is begotten by the next as the swastika,
that prehistoric sun wheel, turns and turns, without end. Each
of the "contraries" rises and falls to its very fullest. Again,
there is no "middling." There is no "sort of." There is only
change, deep and fierce. And the yin and yang and the swastika
are both depictions of this change – the ebb and flow of a
dynamic universe. For me, it is with utmost curiosity that I
think of our prehistoric ancestry, observing winter turn into
spring, observing life beginning and life ending, observing the
moon travel across the night's sky, and engraving these symbols,
into bone and rock and metal, whose meaning, whose significance,
would be *professed* through the observation of the atomic fabric
of reality. And, again, there is no "balance" to be found
there, at least not as we commonly know it.

If not "balance," then what? What other way is there to
work within – to feed off and to flourish within – that tension
that rises out of the struggle between Certainty and
Uncertainty, in a way that we neither reproduce a limited and
limiting dualistic perspective of knowledge, reality, and
"Truth," or a "middling," "sort of" posture that is nothing but

a compromise and a retreat, yet another willful manipulation of the natural way of the world and our existence upon it? Again, what else is there? What I have been exploring throughout these last few pages has hinted at it. The answer is vibration. The answer is the ebb and the flow. In his 2009 article for *College Composition and Communication*, Mao, in advocating what he calls "yin-yang dynamics" as a way to join Chinese and Western rhetorics and the contrary practices therein, explains that to do so and, thus, to open their eyes to a "balance and becoming [that] are always in a flux" (W53), would allow writers and teachers of writing to "use these terms of opposites without buying into the hierarchical and oppositional paradigm, but with an understanding of how difference or opposition can be recast and reimagined on a discursive continuum and through the acts of interconnectivity."

Although we use different terms, Mao's perspective and my own are not strangers. For me, I have come to see, through my reading and my writing and my teaching, that the intercourse between Certainty and Uncertainty – the contrariety, the conflict, the communion – must be dynamic. Again, it must vibrate. It must ebb and flow. As Mao had declared, it must be "always in a flux." Anything else is stasis and stasis is a sort of death. Death without new life. For that space between Certainty and Uncertainty to be void of such vitality, to lack

that dynamic essence, is for that world sun wheel to stop

moving. I do not want to sound overly dramatic, but it is the

truth, at least for me - my "truth." And the necessity of this

dynamic, for thinking and writing and teaching, is a "truth"

shared by others I have brought to my discussion already,

whether it is referred to as the "dialogue" or the "dialectic."

Knoblauch wrote of the former in his article, "Rhetorical

Constructions: Dialogue and Commitment," which I had discussed

in the last chapter by way of his criticisms of "dialogical or

sociological [rhetorical] statement" and its "inevitable

limitations." Knoblauch begins the work with an explanation of

Paulo Freire's "concept of 'praxis,' by which he signifies the

two dimensions of authentic discourse, that of reflection and

that of action, the process of naming reality and the process of

changing reality" (261). It is here that Knoblauch introduces

"dialogue," which was not only essential to Freire's "praxis"

but also his very own contrasting of those different, and

"contrary," rhetorical statements throughout the essay. Of this

"dialogue," he writes:

> The ultimate motive for any transformation is […] the
> need to be more fully human, the need to participate
> more completely and more freely in the world. The
> instrument of transforming is dialogue, where
> competing representations of reality *dynamically
> challenge* each other to compose alternative forms of
> action. In the absence of dialogue, with the erasure
> of anyone's "word," with the prohibition of critical
> inquiry, with the maintenance of dominating
> conditions, however subtly validated as necessity,
> tradition, or evolution, the possibility of becoming

> more fully human is curtailed. Erosion of that
> possibility constitutes the inauthentic discourse –
> the stagnant reality – of oppression. (125, emphasis
> mine)

Knoblauch is writing about the "dialogue" that must occur

between different perspectives upon reality and "Truth" in order

to engender authentic "reflection" and not explicitly between

reflection and "teaching practice ('action')," which is the

realization of what he calls commitment, for all intents, a

thing analogous to Perry's own conception of "commitment," which

before I had deemed the province of Certainty. However, while

Knoblauch asserts that "one's decision to act in the world

suspends the nonjudgmental posture of reflection by committing

the actor to a choice of premises and a position of advocacy"

(138, emphasis mine), he does claim that there is – and that

there must be – a "dialogue" of sorts, a dynamic relationship,

between dialogue and commitment. He explains, "I intend no

causal connection between rhetorical argument and teaching

practice. The relationship is properly dialectical, each term

conditioning and reshaping the other" (126). This is indeed

reminiscent of Perry's description of his own notion of

commitment as "an ongoing, unfolding relationship." Commitment

itself becomes dynamic – a dialogue - among other Commitments,

those that have come before and those yet to come. The

uncertainties confronted and consumed through Knoblauch's

dialogue necessarily forge any commitment, or commitments, that

must be made. Furthermore, because of its "dialectical" nature,

it is a *mutual* "conditioning and reshaping," each bearing

witness to the other. Like the turning of the sun wheel: one

without the other is unwhole and, very well, unwholesome.

This mutual "reshaping" brings to me those words of Peter

Elbow:

> Good learning is not a matter of finding a happy
> medium where both parties are transformed as little
> as possible. Rather both parties must be maximally
> transformed – in a sense deformed. There is violence
> in learning. We cannot learn something without
> eating it, yet we cannot really learn it either
> without being chewed up. (148)

This "mutual deformation" of Elbow's, as it were, is of the same

essence as Knoblauch's dialogue, as well as its "dialogue" with

commitment. It is also metaphor of what is at the heart of

Elbow's philosophy of "cooking," which he explains simply as,

again, "the interaction of contrasting or conflicting material"

(40). Further painting his portrait of it, he writes:

> [C]ooking consists of the process of one piece of
> material (or one process) being transformed by
> interacting with another: one piece of material
> being seen through the lens of another, being dragged
> through the guts of another, being reoriented or
> reorganized in terms of the other, being mapped onto
> the other. (40-1)

Simply put, "cooking" *is* dialectic and, for Elbow, this

"cooking" is an utter necessity to those who would be not only

writers and teachers of writing but, perhaps much more so,

thinkers unlike that which they have been before. In *Embracing*

Contraries, he testifies that there are various types of

"cooking": "Between People," "Between Ideas," "Between Words

and Ideas, Between Immersion and Perspective," "Between

Metaphors," "Between Modes," and "Between You and Symbols on

Paper." While he does not name his terms as such, Elbow also

testifies to the "cooking" that must occur between Uncertainty

and Certainty, something made explicit in the chapter, "Teaching

Two Kinds of Thinking by Teaching Writing." These "two kinds of

thinking" are "first-order thinking," which is "intuitive and

creative and doesn't strive for conscious direction or control

[…][and is used] when we write fast without censoring and let

the words lead us to associations and intuitions we hadn't

foreseen" (55), and "second-order thinking," which is

"conscious, directed, controlled thinking […] committed to

accuracy and strives for logic and control" (55). Perhaps

needless to say, it is not so difficult to hang upon the former

thinking that privileges Uncertainty and upon the latter

thinking that privileges Certainty. To that end, Elbow offers

advice on how to work with and move between these two

"contraries," in particular how to do so in a way that avoids

that "middling" and, instead, pursues that "mutual deformation"

– that "dialogue" and that "dialectic" – to the extreme:

> [S]ince creative and critical thinking are opposite
> and involve mentalities that tend to conflict with
> each other, it helps most people *to learn to work on
> them separately or one at a time by moving back and
> forth between them*. If we are trying to think
> creatively or write generatively, it usually hinders

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us if we try at the same time to think critically or
to revise: it makes us reject what we are engaged in
thinking before we've really worked it out at all –
or to cross out what we've written before we've
finished the sentence or paragraph and allowed
something to happen. (61, emphasis mine)

And bringing this need to "mov[e] back and forth" between first-
order and second-order thinking and all that they entail –
including, as I would have it, Uncertainty and Certainty – to
the historical valorization of the latter and impugning of the
former, Elbow concludes:

[W]e end up with disciplined critical thinking and
uncensored creative thinking dug into opposed
trenches with their guns trained on each other. […]
But this is an unfortunate historical and
developmental accident. If we would see clearly how
it really is with thinking and writing, we would see
that the situation isn't either/or, it's both/and:
the more first-order thinking, the more second-order
thinking; the more generative uncensored writing, the
more critical revising; and vice versa. *It's a
matter of learning to work on opposites one at a time
in a generous spirit of mutual reinforcement rather
than in a spirit of restrictive combat*. (62-3,
emphasis mine)

"Mutual deformation." "Mutual reinforcement." Again, this
"moving back and forth" that Elbow believes in, truly, is like
the changing of the seasons or the rising and falling of the
tides. It is ebb and flow. It is dialectical.

Throughout *Embracing Contraries*, Elbow brings his advice
regarding this "ebb and flow," this dialectic, again and again
to thinking and to writing, whether for academic purposes or
not, but it is when he discusses how to realize it – or, at the
very least, how to *try* to realize it – through the teaching of
writing that I find his philosophy of "contraries" most

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palpable. To teachers of writing struggling with the "opposite

extremes" called of them, he offers the following advice:

> But it is possible to make peace between opposites by
> alternating between them so that you are never trying
> to do contrary things at any one moment. One
> opposite leads naturally to the other; indeed,
> extremity in one enhances extremity in the other, in
> a positive, reinforcing fashion. (152)

For Elbow, there is a sort of freedom found in such an

"exaggeration" of extremes. He explains:

> What is pleasing about this alternating approach is
> the way it naturally leads a teacher to higher
> standards yet greater supportiveness. That is, I
> feel better about being really tough if I know I am
> going to turn around and be more on the student's
> side than usual. And contrarily I do not have to
> hold back from being an ally of students when I know
> I have set really high standards. (155)

In a very similar way, I believe that there is, too, a sort of

"freedom" in exaggerating the tension between Certainty and

Uncertainty. But, contrary to what Elbow suggests, even if

unintentionally, I do not believe that there is anything

"natural" about an alternation between them – a dialectic

between them. This may sound ironic given my previous

discussion of dynamic equilibrium and atomic vibration and sun

wheels. While it may indeed be a fact of nature, when it comes

to human thought and all that rises out of it, it is easier to

pursue one extreme over another because of that tendency of

humanity to hunt down Certainty. While this may not be the

better or the more beneficial outcome, it is the *easier* one:

the easy way out. Elbow writes that "One opposite leads

naturally to the other" and that, for teaching, the "[alternating approach] naturally leads a teacher to higher standards yet greater supportiveness." However, what I hear Elbow saying, louder and more clearly, is that such a movement – that "cooking," that dialectic – must be explicit and, then, once it is so, it must be exploited. In short, the "alternating approach," his "embracing contraries," must be deliberate. Furthermore, it must be *made* deliberate.

This is the hard way, the difficult road to walk down as a writer or a teacher or both, but, as I have been trying to explain, what can come from it – seeing the never before known, thinking the never before known, writing the never before known – is worth it. I have not read any suggestions, or experience it in such a way that it would have suggested to me, that this dialectic is an *unconscious* process: something that simply … *happens*. Returning to Weil's explanation of dynamic equilibrium, there must be a catalyst for it to occur. The writer or the teacher of writing must be that catalyst, or try to be it. And the student in a writing class, that burgeoning writer and their writing both, must learn to become their own catalyst, for themselves: for their world and their place in it and their perspective of the reality or "truth" of both.

I suppose I have, by now, made very obvious that my philosophy of composition as well as my teaching philosophy have

been greatly influenced by this concept of the dialectic, in particular as it stands between Certainty and Uncertainty. Before I explain how I have attempted to bring it to my own teaching practice through the years – how I have attempted to "operationalize" it, so to speak - by laying out the particular "Methods" of the writing courses I have instructed, I would return to John Dewey's philosophy of education, rooted in his theory of "reflective thinking," as well as William Perry's theory of "relativistic pragmatism," "intellectual and moral relativism" married to a progressing "commitment," because, I believe, each engenders that dialectic, evincing it as fully and deeply as I have found. Each of them declares the need for the critical and thorough exploration of unknowns. Each of them declares the need for translating the knowledge gained from inquiry into conscious and disciplined action. And each of them declares the need for the continual, nurturing influence of those processes by each other, resulting in dynamic that is always flourishing, always evolving. Because of this, in many ways, Dewey and Perry's theories would seem to stand as forebears of the "Dialogue" and the "Commitment" of Knoblauch and the "Cooking" and the "Contraries" of Elbow.

   I would reverse chronology and begin with Perry. The purpose of Perry's four-years-long study at Harvard was to examine "the variety of ways in which […] students responded to

the relativism which permeates the intellectual and social

atmosphere of a pluralistic university" (3-4). And because he

declares that the "response to pluralism in thought and values,

and indeed [the] capacity to generate pluralism […] is therefore

critical to the destiny of a democracy" (6), he perceived that

there was a very defined relationship between relativistic

thought and thoughtful action. From his observations, he

concluded that the progression from "tendencies toward dualistic

thinking [to] tendencies towards contingent thinking" (8)

exhibited by some of the students in the study "represent[ed] a

coherent development in the forms in which they functioned

intellectually, in the forms in which they experienced values,

and in the forms in which they construed their world" (8). In

other words, those changes in the way they thought of "values"

and "their world," a movement from "we-right-good vs. other-

wrong-bad" perceptions of reality and "truth" to "contextual and

relative" ones, were not the result of individual idiosyncrasy

but of a *common phenomenon* – the experience with and response to

"diversity" - with conspicuous and consecutive stages that could

be identified, measured, and described.

Out of this came Perry's nine-"position" developmental

"scheme," along with three possibilities of "deflection." While

most of his report is dedicated to delineating those positions

and explaining their distinctive features, to what did he

attribute that movement, that progress or that evolution, from

the first to the ninth? Why did these students change the way

they thought? It would seem that, because of the exposure,

again and again, to thoughts and beliefs and concepts – to

"truths" - that do not fit the earlier perspectives, there is an

utter *need* for relativism. As Perry contends, "It is not for

nothing that the undergraduate turns metaphysician" (33). From

his description, this "need" brings about the "drastic

revolution" that defines his fifth position because of "the

failure of a dualistic framework to assimilate the expanding

generalization of Relativism" (110). As Perry writes, the

students now experience "the radical reperception of all

knowledge as contextual and relativistic" (109). Simply put,

whereas, before, relativistic thinking had been the exception,

it now becomes the rule – it becomes "habitual." "Relativism is

perceived as the common characteristic of all thought, all

knowing, all of man's relation to his world" (111). But with

the "drastic evolution" born out of that "need" for comes a new

urge for what Perry called "individual personal commitment":

"personal commitment in a relative world." Of this, he writes:

> If all I have been taught up to now is open to
> question, especially to my question, then my sense of
> who is responsible shifts radically from outside to
> me. But I see too that my questions and my answers
> are likewise open to question. Yet if I am not to
> spend my life in questions about questions and am to
> act, choose, decide and live, on what basis am I to
> do it? (34)

Among all the possible realities, all the possible "truths," a

commitment, a commitment to a forward movement, is, similarly,

"needed." But I would again ask the question: what was the

cause of those "needs" – the "need" for relativism and the

inseparable "need" for commitment? What was the impetus? What

was, again, the "catalyst"? For Perry – again, circa the late-

1950s through the mid-1960s – it was the exposure to "diversity"

offered by the "liberal arts college," of which he explains:

> The shock [of pluralism of values and points of view]
> may be intentional on the part of individual
> professors, as it is most frequently, though not
> always, in courses in General Education, or it may be
> simply the by-product of the clash of different
> professors, each one of whom is sure he teaches "the"
> truth. (35)

But he claims that that "shock" must be a deliberate thing, at

least according to the statements of the students who had

experienced it.

> [F]rom what our students have told us […] the
> educational impact of diversity can be at its best
> when it is deliberate. When a teacher asks his
> students to read conflicting authorities and then
> asks them to assess the nature and meaning of the
> conflict, he is in a strong position to assist them
> to go beyond simple diversity into the disciplines of
> relativity of thought through which specific
> instances of diversity can be productively exploited.
> He can teach the relation, the relativism, of one
> system of thought to another. *In short, he can teach
> disciplined independence of mind*. (35, emphasis
> mine)

And it is the responsibility of the teacher, those students'

instructor, to plan and then execute that "shock" which has the

potential to bring out that relative way of perceiving and

thinking – and writing.

But this is a somewhat vague answer to that "How?" and to that "Why?" This is owing, without a doubt, to the fact that Perry's study at Harvard consisted solely of interviews with students who had been exposed to that "diversity" and "pluralism of values and points of view." There was no analysis of pedagogy or observation of classroom practice. As Perry himself admits towards the end of his report, "[T]he steps between [his developmental scheme's] generalities and practical educational applications will remain many and arduous" (209). This admission made very clear, he does offer, from what he had taken away from those students' experiences with relativism, some conclusions about their motivation and about the "administrative and instructional implications" for stoking that motivation. Of motivation, Perry concludes that, because "[a] student's movement from one Position to another involves the reorganization of major personal investments" (49), progress or not towards relativism was utterly dependent upon "some urge, yearning, and standard proper to the person himself" (51). Despite a "press" from the environment, whether from instructors or family or peers, movement towards or away from relativism did not happen unless the students themselves were *prepared* to move. As Perry concludes: "A student's movement, or lack of movement, could therefore be conceived as the resultant of […] the urge to progress and the urge to conserve. These forces would be

considered as primarily internal, each with its supports in the environment" (52). Again, because of those "personal investments," whether those students chose to "progress" or to "conserve," it was, in the end, their choice alone: how they *chose* to conceive of themselves, their world, and their place in it. The reality of these. The "truth" of these. As Perry concludes: "The students' endeavor to orient themselves in the world through an understanding of the acts of knowing and valuing is therefore more than intellectual and philosophical. It is a moral endeavor in the most personal sense" (54).

And the very "personal" nature of those students' movement across those nine positions held very definite significance for Perry about how teachers could promote "diversity" and "relativism" given that fact. The most crucial for me is his advice about how teachers can try to avoid "cultural shock" and welcome students to further and further relativistic ways of perceiving reality and "truth." For Perry, this could be done through deliberate overtures to the "personal." He explains: "Our students' accounts suggest that an assist might come from explicit reference to analogies in those relativistic structures which the student has already developed at more concrete levels of experience" (211). However, Perry claims that an instructor's address to the "personal" cannot fully account for an arrival unto the last position of the scheme, Position 9,

where students perceive "all knowledge and values […] as contextual and relative" yet also realize "Commitment as an ongoing, unfolding activity through which he expresses his life style." For this to happen, there needs to be something more. As he explains:

> The efficient fostering of competence in the skills and disciplines of contextual meta-thinking does of course require […] the further development of those ways of teaching which encourage risking, groping, analytic detachment and synthetic thought. But our students' reports reveal that this competence alone would tend to result in a development no further than that expressed in our scheme of Position 5. (212)

And that "something more" that would seem to be a realization of a "social" relationship, a "social" responsibility. Furthermore, that "something more" is a dialectic, a "dialogue" between the "personal" and the "social," both influencing each other as relative thought and commitment shape and reshape – "mutually deform" - each other. To the rhetorical question, "What environmental sustenance most supports students in the choice to use their competence to orient themselves through Commitments – as opposed to using it to establish nonresponsible alienation?" (213), Perry offers the following answer:

> For the majority, […] the most important support seemed to derive from a special realization of community. This was the realization that in the very risks, separateness and individuality of working out their Commitments, they were in the *same boat*, not only with each other but with their instructors as well. (213, emphasis mine)

Beyond this, there is also the necessity for students of "reciprocal acts of recognition and confirmation" (213): not

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simply by "observing that others are like himself in that their cares and quandaries are like his own" but also by "experienc[ing] himself as seen by others in the same way."

    Put simply, students whom we, as teachers, would see attain relativism and commitment both "[need] not only models to emulate but the experience of community with them," in this way, the "personal" becoming "social" and the "social" becoming "personal," both dialectically furthering and deepening the other in the process. With Perry's developmental "scheme" then, what you have is that dialectic manifesting at different times and at different places in students' experience of the educational process. Most profoundly, there exists the dialectic between uncertainties and certainties among "knowledge and values" and "values and points of view" through exposure to "diversity" and relativity" and between the uncertainty of relativistic thought and the certainty of commitment. And all the while, these churn and surge back and forth across an "intellectual and ethical" field that is defined by yet another dialectic, this between the "personal," the "internal," and the "social," the "community." All of them influence and are influenced by the others in a dynamic that is "ongoing, unfolding." In this way, the "intellectual and ethical development" that Perry observed through his study and described in his subsequent report is, ideally, not something that ends

with a graduation from college or university but is, again, "ongoing, unfolding." In this way, that "intellectual and ethical development" becomes life itself. Education becomes life itself.

This view of "education" as a dialectical and continual phenomenon as laid out by Perry is something shared by Dewey. The fact that Perry does not reference Dewey or any of his work in *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* has always been surprising to me because his findings, although not forthcoming in terms of explicit suggestions for actual teaching, would seem to almost emerge from Dewey and his theories of education. This is not to say that Perry owes some "debt" to Dewey that he has failed to acknowledge. No. I would say that the conclusions he had taken away from those Harvard students stand almost as realizations or proofs of Dewey's philosophy because it is something that is so rooted in an almost natural understanding of, as his book proclaims, how we think. How we, we as children, we as students, we as adults, we as teachers, and so on, think — and *can* think further, deeper, fuller.

I realize I have thrown any claim I could have made to objectivity — if I still believed in such a thing — out the window by now. But, regardless, I believe I have returned to Dewey time and time again since I read *How We Think* for the very

first time some years ago now because of that understanding and

the philosophy of education that arose from it: simple yet

profound. And so I would now turn to Dewey, as I had with

Perry, in order to examine his portrait of that dialectic

between Uncertainty and Certainty, in doing so to establish what

exists as almost an ideal specimen against which I can compare

my own attempts at such a thing. Dewey's dialectic, and his

philosophy of education as a whole, is rooted in his essential

concept of "reflective thinking." I have already discussed his

theory of "reflective thinking," but, for the sake of emphasis,

I would offer a very simple explanation – in particular, Dewey's

explanation for how to foster and nurture it. Of this

"reflective thought," he professes that, "[I]t alone is truly

educative in value" (2). Because of that, anything else is,

simply for Dewey, *not* "thought." Of this "*non*-reflective

thought," as it were, he writes:

> [These] thoughts grow up unconsciously and without
> reference to the attainment of correct belief. They
> are picked up – we know not how. From obscure
> sources and by unnoticed channels they insinuate
> themselves into acceptance and become unconsciously a
> part of our mental furniture. Tradition,
> instruction, imitation – all of which depend upon
> authority in some form, or appeal to our own
> advantage, or fall in with a strong passion – are
> responsible for them. Such thoughts are prejudices,
> that is, prejudgments, not judgments proper that rest
> upon a survey of evidence. (4-5)

This species of "thinking" stands opposite "reflective or

distinctively intellectual thinking" because it does not really

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call for thinking. In essence, it is not really "thinking" but,

instead, the summoning forth from memory of, as Cixious had

herself described it, "the already-written, the already-known."

It involves passive recollection of a reality or "truth"

dictated by "[t]radition, instruction, imitation" and nothing

more. In this way, this sort of "thinking" allows for a

strictly dualistic, black or white perspective to perpetuate

because nothing contrary, nothing unknown, nothing uncertain

enters the situation and, thus, exists within its limited

system. As Perry may have observed, there is no "diversity" to

be had. What, then, truly separates "reflective thought,"

according to Dewey, is that utterly crucial "survey of

evidence." Throughout most of his writing, he refers to this

"survey" more commonly as "inquiry," which is a "systematic and

protracted" method of "reflection." Whether a "survey" or an

"inquiry" or "reflection," the process was inspired by Dewey's

obvious admiration of the "scientific method," which disciplines

what he called "scientific thinking." The defining feature of

the scientific method that made it something so very

indispensible for Dewey was the analysis of the common "facts"

of nature through a purposeful and systematic confrontation with

variation – with "diversity." He writes:

> [T]he scientist advances by assuming that what seems
> to observation to be a single total fact is in truth
> complex. He attempts, therefore, to break up the
> single fact […] into a number of lesser facts. His

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> method of proceeding is by varying conditions one by
> one so far as possible, and noting just what happens
> when a given condition is eliminated. (150)

Of this notion of "varying conditions," he explains further

that, "Observations formed by variation of conditions on the

basis of some idea or theory constitute experiment. Experiment

is the chief resource in scientific reasoning because it

facilitates the picking out of insignificant elements in a

gross, vague whole" (152). For the scientist undertaking such

an experimental method, "facts" are tested through the

introduction of variation - the "novel and variable." Thus the

mark of "[e]xperimental thinking, or scientific reasoning" is

the testing, deliberate and thorough, of the known with the

unknown – the certain with the uncertain. In this way,

"experiment" becomes the dialectic: "the dialectical method."

And if we see the dialectic I have been writing about thus far

as a sort of "scientific method of thought," it is at the heart

of not simply Dewey's theory of "reflective thought" but his

philosophy of education.

    This said, I would return to the setting of his original

portrait of "reflection": "a forked road situation," "a

situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which

proposes alternatives" (11) and, because of that, where we must

ask ourselves, "Which road is right?" He describes the

significance of that "situation," again, as follows:

> Difficulty or obstruction in the way of reaching a
> belief brings us […] to a pause. In the suspense of
> uncertainty, we metaphorically climb a tree; we try
> to find some standpoint from which we may survey
> additional facts and, getting a more commanding view
> of the situation, may decide how the facts stand
> related to one another. (11)

This "[d]ifficulty or obstruction in the way of reaching a
belief" produces what Dewey calls a state of "perplexity." It
is the experience of a "problem […] [that] challenges the mind
so that it makes belief at all uncertain" (9). All that seemed
so very Certain before – again, "the already-written, the
already-known" – cannot be relied upon, like some sort of
security blanket, to resolve that "problem" or the "perplexity"
it evokes. Not unlike a scientist in a laboratory, this "man
travelling in an unfamiliar region" must also undertake an
experiment of his own. He must usher in that dialectic, that
"scientific method of thought," as I had called it. There must
be the conscious introduction of "variation" and the
scrutinizing and testing and questioning of the unknown and the
uncertain. All against the known and the certain. All against
other unknowns and other uncertainties. In order for that
"perplexity" to be resolved and some judgment or decision to be
made as to that earlier question, "Which road is right?" this
process – this dialectical experiment, as it were – needs to
happen. If it does not happen, then, as I said before, neither
does what Dewey would call real "thinking" – "reflective
thinking." Because of this, that "forked road situation," that

experiencing of "perplexity," is the birthplace of "reflective thinking." As he professes, "[T]he origin of thinking is some perplexity, confusion, or doubt" (12). For Dewey, that "perplexity, confusion, or doubt" is the very "catalyst" of education.

But that "forked road situation" suggests something else about Dewey's dialectic, what is very well its raison d'etre. The traveler standing before Dewey's "forked road" must continue on his way. He cannot simply stand there and "reflect." He cannot simply stand there and "reflect" simply *to* "reflect." Simply put, this "reflective thinking" must be done *for something*. He must undertake that dialectical experiment that breeds "reflective thought" in order to travel unto whatever his destination may be. To such an end, a judgment or a decision must be brought forth. A commitment must be made. For John Dewey, this is the true purpose of education. "Reflective thought" and an education that would foster and nurture it must be "good for something" because *we* must be "good for something." For Dewey, that "something" is the progress and prosperity of society – of the progress and prosperity of those among us in society. Such a purpose is at the heart of his philosophy of "morals" and the training of those "morals" is the purpose of education. This is the essential meaning of Dewey's 1916 text, *Democracy and Education*. It begins with his philosophy of

education, but it ends with his conclusion about what education

serves – again, what it is "good for." And it is with the

following passage that his book does conclude:

> A narrow and moralistic view of morals is responsible
> for the failure to recognize that all the aims and
> values which are desirable in education are
> themselves moral. Discipline, natural development,
> culture, social efficiency, are moral traits – marks
> of a person who is *a worthy member of that society*
> *which it is the business of education to further*.
> There is an old saying to the effect that it is not
> enough for a man to be good; he must be good for
> something. The something for which a man must be
> good is capacity to live as a social member so that
> what he gets from living with others he contributes.
> […] Discipline, culture, social efficiency, personal
> refinement, improvement of character are but phases
> of the growth of capacity nobly to share in [this]
> balanced experience. And education is not a mere
> means to such a life. Education is such a life. *To*
> *maintain capacity for such education is the essence*
> *of morals. For conscious life is a continual*
> *beginning afresh*. (344, emphasis mine)

Because the cultivation of "morals" brings about the further

cultivation of "conscious life," which is, more or less, the sum

total of "reflective thought," the training of "morals" thus

brings about the further training of "conscious life." But

because the reverse is also true – the influence of "conscious

life" or "reflective thought" upon those "morals" – the

burgeoning of thought is the burgeoning of "morals." The result

of such a dialectical relationship is the progressing of society

as well as the progressing of those who live within that

society, alongside of us.

   This relationship where one exists and evolves because of

the other, through the other, recalls Perry's conclusion that

the "response to pluralism in thought and values, and indeed
[the] capacity to generate pluralism […] is therefore critical
to the destiny of democracy." You simply cannot have one with
the other. For Dewey, "morals" further society through what he
calls "overt and obvious conduct" – "overt action." The
decisions that are made and the actions that are taken that
further society arise from "conscious deliberating," a
"disciplined" inquiry where "conscious purpose, conscious
desire, and deliberate reflection" are demanded. And as I wrote
before, it is this sort of thought, "reflective thought" and the
whole of a "conscious life," that breed those "morals." Again,
it is thought that not simply allows for "variation," the "novel
and variable" but welcomes it, embraces it, urges it, that will
bring this forth. And, in the end, this sort of "reflective
thinking" and the disciplined and deliberate "action" which
arise from it nurture not only society but the *self* as well. As
he writes, "[T]he self is not something ready-made, but
something *in continuous formation through choice of action*"
(336, emphasis mine). In this way, "self-interest" is also at
the same time "social-interest," "a separation between interest
and self" (336) existing as nothing but a "false notion." Like
those other relationships I have already described, the
relationship between the "self" and "society" is no different
according to his philosophy of education. The rise of the one

is also the rise of the other. But, unfortunately, the erosion

of the one is also the erosion of the other. For Dewey, it is

the goal of education to promote and perpetuate them all. At

least it should be.

What we have with John Dewey's philosophy of education is a

somewhat elaborate dialectical symbiosis between "morals" and

"reflective thought," between "reflective thought" and "overt

action," between all of these with "society" – *and* the "self."

This system that Dewey has established with his philosophy is a

greater dialectic between parts that necessitate and nurture

Uncertainty and those that necessitate and nurture Certainty.

They shape and reshape each other. They further and deepen each

other. Because of this, when Dewey writes, in *How We Think*, "To

cultivate unhindered unreflective external activity is to foster

enslavement, for it leaves the person at the mercy of appetite,

sense, and circumstance" (67, emphasis mine), he is not simply

talking about the "enslavement" of the individual, the "self,"

but about the "enslavement" of society – of us all. But

conversely, when he writes, but the page before, that "Genuine

freedom, in short, is intellectual" (66), he is not simply

talking about the "freedom" of the single "intellect" but of the

greater "intellect," the social "intellect." And through "overt

action," this intellectual "freedom" can become apractical,

lived "freedom." Again, the dialectic. For me, the sunwheel

can almost be seen turning as you read *How We Think* or his

Democracy and Education. And, for Dewey, it is the purpose of

education to turn that sunwheel and to foster that dialectic:

for the student and for the student's world. *Our* world.

   But, as a teacher, I would ask Dewey a very serious

question: how is the teacher supposed to instruct his (or her)

students about this dialectic and all its crucial parts? How

are we, as teachers, supposed to train this dialectic? To teach

students how to train this dialectic for themselves? These are

particularly consequential questions given that fact of Dewey's

warning against "bricks," which he offers at the beginning of

Democracy and Education:

> Men live in a community in virtue of the things which
> they have in common; and communication is the way in
> which they come to possess things in common. What
> they have in common in order to form a community or
> society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge – a
> common understanding – like-mindedness as they
> sociologists say. *Such things cannot be passed
> physically from one to another, like bricks*; they
> cannot be shared as persons would share a pie by
> dividing it into physical pieces. (4, emphasis mine)

Those "bricks" have significance to Dewey in terms of education:

teachers handing down to their students "bricks" of preconceived

and prefabricated knowledge or "truth," static in their utter

Certainty. For Dewey, this does not foster real thinking, but,

at best, imitation and, at worst, "enslavement." But, again,

how can teachers teach "perplexity"? The "novel and variable"?

"Reflective thinking" and its experimental, dialectical

processes? "Morals"? Deliberate "action"? How can any of this be taught if, as Dewey writes in *How We Think*, "Since learning is something that the pupil has to do himself and for himself, the initiative lies with the learner" (36)?

Like Perry's report from his research at Harvard, Dewey's philosophy is not overly concerned with offering any practical advice for teachers who would bring his theories of "reflective thought" or deliberate "action" to their classes and their students therein. Furthermore, because his philosophy is not intended for any particular academic field or subject but, instead, the whole of "education," it must be adapted to fit the philosophies of those particular fields, such as, with my situation, the teaching of writing. But as I was told many years ago now, it is more crucial to contemplate and analyze and explore my own pedagogy, my own teaching philosophy, than to fill some "tool box" with assignments and techniques. The latter has to rise, organically, out of the former. Otherwise, I simply have some "tricks" but not the theoretical foundation of how to use them – and *why*. To that end, Dewey's philosophy is channeled through a particular view of a teacher's relationship to students. Following his frank rebuke against "bricks" in *Democracy and Education*, he had this to say about what the teacher's role *should be* in the classroom: "The teacher is a guide and director; he steers the boat, but the

energy that propels it must come from those who are learning"

(36). All of the advice that he does offer to teachers, those

"steerers" of the "boat" that is education, is channeled through

his definition of what it means to be a "teacher." Writing of

"curiosity" – the "open mind" to which "nature and social

experience are full of varied and subtle challenges to look

further" (33) – he furthers this definition:

> With respect then to curiosity, the teacher has
> usually more to learn than to teach. Rarely can he
> aspire to the office of kindling or even increasing
> it. His task is rather to keep alive the sacred
> spark of wonder and to fan the flame that already
> glows. His problem is to protect the spirit of
> inquiry, to keep it from becoming blasé from
> overexcitement, wooden from routine, fossilized
> through dogmatic instruction, or dissipated by random
> exercise upon trivial things. (33-4)

For Dewey, that "sacred spark of wonder" is not something that

some students have but others simply … don't. No. For Dewey,

all students have that "spark" of curiosity, but it is *their*

"spark": it is individual to them. Because of that, that

already present curiosity within all students cannot be stoked

in the same way. Simply put, all students cannot be "steered"

in the same way. Needless to say, this renders the stimulating

of motivation is a very complicated undertaking. If a teacher

is not to bestow upon his students "bricks" of an "already-

written, already-known" knowledge that is the derivative of a

perspective of reality and "truth" ordained by "fixed traditions

and semi-sacred dogmas" – "absolute and unshakeable" – then how

exactly *is* that teacher to evoke for them that fundamental

experience of "perplexity," that cornerstone of the whole of

Dewey's philosophy of education?

According to Dewey, it is the responsibility of that

teacher, as "guide and director," to put before students those

subjects and those assignments – what he refers to as "materials

and occupations" – that will inaugurate that "perplexity" in

them. However, the problems that arise out of this experience

are *theirs*. To offer them the answers to those problems or to

explain the greater meanings of both the problems and the

answers is to defeat and to betray the purpose of education, at

least in Dewey's eyes. Students must work out those problems on

their own: for themselves, their lives, and their worlds. It

is also the easy way out.

To those teachers who would choose the much more difficult

road to "steer" rather than to "sermonize," the greatest advice

that Dewey would offer is the nature of the "materials and

occupations" that should be used to educe that "perplexity" in

their students. In *How We Think*, he contends:

> It is […] a stupid error to suppose that arbitrary
> tasks must be imposed from without in order to
> furnish the factor of perplexity and difficulty which
> is the necessary cue to thought. Every vital
> activity of any depth and range inevitably meets
> obstacles in the course of its effort to realize
> itself – a fact that renders the search for
> artificial or external problems quite superfluous.
> The difficulties that present themselves within the
> development of an experience are, however, to be
> cherished by the educator, not minimized, for they

are the natural stimuli to reflective inquiry. (64-5)

To Dewey, this "perplexity" cannot be "artificially" brought to students or else that "natural stimuli" will dissipate. It must arise *within* the students themselves, not "from without."

Furthermore, so that it may beget "personal reflection" – "reflective thinking" – there must be something about that "perplexity" that is indeed "personal": it has have some "personal" relevance to the lives and lived experiences of those students. But what sorts of "materials and occupations" can do this? In *Democracy and Education*, he writes of the necessity of education to "supply a context of experience in which problems naturally suggest themselves" (149). He states that such a "context of experience" must be "sufficiently like situations which have already been dealt with so that pupils will have some control of the means of handling it" (151). His reasoning is that, while "difficulty is an indispensible stimulus to thinking, […] not all difficulties call out thinking. Sometimes they overwhelm and submerge and discourage" (151). Returning to *How We Think*, Dewey explains the relationship that "situations which have already been dealt with" must have with the "novel and variable" so that "perplexity" can emerge. Writing of the "balancing of new and old, of the far and that close by, involved in reflection," he explains:

> The more remote supplies the stimulus and the motive;
> the nearer at hand furnishes the point of approach
> and available resources. This principle may also be
> stated in this form: the best thinking occurs when
> the easy and the difficult are duly proportioned to
> each other. The easy and the familiar are
> equivalents, as are the strange and the difficult.
> Too much that is easy gives no ground for inquiry;
> too much of the hard renders inquiry hopeless. (222)

Those "materials and occupations" must have some deliberate rooting in those "situations which have already been dealt with," but, at the very same time and in a *very* dialectical fashion, through the introduction of "the strange and the difficult," the "familiar" and "nearer at hand" become foreign and contradictory. Uncertain. And because of this, they become *problematic* and, thus, a veritable wellspring of "perplexity." But, again, it is for the students to experience that "perplexity" – or *not*. This is the risk of teaching. Although Dewey does not describe in any detail, at all, those "materials and occupations" that could accomplish the dialectic "scientific" process of thought that he described, he does declare that, besides "perplexity" and the "balancing of new and old," there must be simple *value* in it all for the students. And this value has the weight to beat the odds, so to speak, with that "risk." It must have worth to their lives, their worlds, and their place in it. Otherwise, it becomes "drudgery" and, thus, the "process of doing loses all value for the doer" (218). Of the opposite, Dewey writes:

> Willingness to work for ends by means of acts not
> naturally attractive is best attained by securing
> such an appreciation of the value of the end that a
> sense of its value is transferred to its means of
> accomplishment. Not interesting in themselves, they
> borrow interest from the result with which they are
> associated. (218)

This "value" is "conjoint free mental play and thoughtfulness" (219) – the marriage of "pure interest in truth" and the "love of the free play of thought" – which is so *natural* to children but is often lost upon maturity because of the pressure of "social conditions." For Dewey, it is the work of the teacher to stimulate his or her students to pursue such "value" in those "materials and occupations" put before them. To do this, to stimulate the "enrichment of the present for its own sake [which] is the just heritage of childhood and the best insurer of future growth" (219), is to stimulate *wonder*, that thing I sought out in my own writing when I too was a child and then, years later, when I began working to become a teacher of writing.

And now that I have explored those portraits of the dialectical opposition of Uncertainty and Certainty as offered, whether explicitly or implicitly, through the educational philosophy of John Dewey and the research study of William Perry, I would now turn to *me*: my very own attempts to realize this theoretical purpose and the "potential" and "promise" therein in the writing classes I have taught over the years. I

would say a few things about my pedagogy before explaining, with as much detail as I can offer, how I have tried to translate that dialectic into practice. Towards the end of *Embracing Contraries*, Peter Elbow had this to say about the raison d'etre of his "cooking":

> Searching for contradiction and affirming both sides can allow you to find both the limitations of the system in which you are working and a way to break out of it. If you find contradictions and try too quickly to get rid of them, you are only neatening up, even straightening, the system you are in. To actually get beyond that system you need to find the deepest contradictions and, instead of trying to reconcile them, heighten them by affirming both sides. And if you can nurture the contradictions cleverly enough, you can be led to *a new system with a wider frame of reference, one that includes the two new elements which were felt as contradictory in the old frame of reference*. (241, emphasis mine)

If my philosophy of teaching were to have some defining epigraph, some words that distilled the primordial essence of what I thought about the "How?" and the "Why?" of teaching, it would be these. Elbow does indeed summarize my teaching philosophy very well, very well better than I could do myself. For me, thinking and learning – and writing – rises from out of the wreckage of the disturbing head-on collision of those "deepest contradictions." And teaching is provoking and inciting – catalyzing – those collisions. "Nurtur[ing]" those collisions, within the student but also within yourself, as a teacher. Between freedom and constraint. Between exploration and scrutiny. Between the "personal" and the "social." Between hope and skepticism. Between inspiration and criticism.

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Between "process" and "product." Between philosophy and

practice. And, yes, between Uncertainty and Certainty.

All of these collisions, and more, are dialectical in that

each side "nurtures" the other. Each side furthers and deepens

the other. I would also say, out of this, that my philosophy of

teaching is also heavily defined by a collision between

competing, contrary, and contradictory theoretical "schools"

within the field of composition and rhetoric. If you asked me

to swear allegiance to any one particular camp or movement, I

couldn't do it even if I wanted to. I have never seen myself –

my own perspective upon the "How?" and the "Why?" of teaching –

represented accurately, justly, by any single one of them. But

with a good many of the historical taxonomies I have read,

wherein the rhetorical landscape is divvied into theoretical

lots like so many easily delimited residential properties,

"allegiance" is something that is not simply expected but,

almost, *demanded*. Those within the field must affiliate and

align with a particular philosophical camp and they are either

with it … or against it. Very commonly, these histories and,

therein, those defining borders separating one school of thought

from the next are offered as black or white truths that are

static.   Very commonly, there is little, if any, *gray* to be

found among them. And this is the very reason why, although I

find these taxonomies fascinating - in particular their attempts

to coin wholly new and different monikers for those camps or
schools – I do not abide by them. Because I do not see myself
or my teaching philosophy defined according to their cleaving
delineations, I have chosen to defy them. And because of this,
I feel that, as a teacher, what is needed here too is dialectic,
or, as Lester Faigley referred to it, "synthesis."

    In his essay, "Competing Theories of Process: A Critique
and a Proposal," Faigley examines three different, and widely
held to be irreconcilable, "conceptions of writing as a
process," with the stated intention of laying bare the
limitations that such static definitions impose upon that same
"process" each would seek to describe, claiming that
"disciplinary claims for writing must be based on a conception
of process broader than any of the three views" (528). After
portraying the differences between them, he offers his solution
to averting those limitations and, to Faigley, it can be
summarized in a single word: "synthesis." In that last part of
his article, "Towards a Synthesis," he writes:

> If the process movement is to continue to influence
> the teaching of writing and to supply alternatives to
> current-traditional pedagogy, it must take a broader
> conception of writing, one that understands writing
> processes are historically *dynamic* – not psychic
> states, cognitive routines, or neutral social
> relationships. This historical awareness would allow
> us to *reinterpret and integrate* each of the
> theoretical perspectives I have outlined. (537,
> emphasis added)

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In Faigley's estimation, "synthesis," this means of

"reinterpret[ing] and integrat[ing]" writing theory and

practice, is absolutely necessary if narrow perceptions of

composition, and its simple academic significance, are to be

undone. Simply put, to dissolve those limitations, the all-too-

simply installed and all-too-common borders that separate

theories must be themselves dissolved. Those limited and

limiting divisions must be seen as, more often than not, nothing

but constructions for convenience's sake and, thus, writing

itself must be seen from a much more "dynamic" perspective. For

Faigley, and for myself, those borders must be re-seen – they

must be crossed and they must be defied - if a truer potential

for writing and the teaching of writing are to be realized.

Again, what is needed is a dialectic: a dialectic between

those philosophical camps. I have come to define my philosophy

of teaching in terms of this dialectic, in particular, a

dialectic between what has become known as the "expressivist"

movement and that of "critical literacy," or "critical

pedagogy." I have always felt, deeply, a resonance between

these two schools that those borders would suppress and it has

been my undertaking to deepen that resonance by exploring it

further and further, not only philosophically but practically,

through my teaching: teaching in a real classroom with real

students doing real writing. Keeping Elbow's warning about

"middling" and Knoblauch's own warning against a lacking of "commitment" *very* much in mind, this dialectic, or, in Faigley's terms, "synthesis," between "expressivism" and "critical literacy" is what I feel defines my own philosophy of composition. It is where I see myself both philosophically and practically.

To that end, I would leave what I have already said about my teaching philosophy as the final word on the subject and move on now to my teaching practice, my methods and, as Dewey had referred to them, my "materials and occupations," and, therein, my repeated attempts to realize, or "operationalize," that dialectic-promoting ideal of education as exhibited, again, through the foundational work of John Dewey and William Perry. In doing so, I will reference what I did throughout my most recent writing classes: the required freshman writing course, "English 110: Critical Reading and Writing," at the University of Delaware in Newark, Delaware, which I taught during the Fall 2007 and Spring 2008 semesters. All of the other writing classes that I have put together and seen through, whether at the school where I had received my Master's or SUNY – Stony Brook on Long Island or Widener in Chester, Pennsylvania, had brought me to those classes, and the students in them, that I taught that year at U. of DE. Because of that, they were the culmination of all my efforts to realize the potential of that

"dialectic." I will begin with the "skeleton," my themes and

assignments, and then move on to the "meat," my purposes and

rationale.

Although not a requirement by any means for any writing

course at the University of Delaware, my classes had a "course

theme" that molded every aspect of the course, from the articles

that my students were to be read to the essays that my students

were to write. It was the heartbeat or the soul of the whole of

the conversation, whether within or without the classroom. As

stated in the course syllabi:

> Throughout this course, we will be exploring the
> issues of Identity, Individuality, and Perspective.
> How do you define your identity – your "self": who
> are you, who do you want to be, and why? What makes
> someone an "individual" – and are you one? What
> makes your thoughts and perceptions "yours"? What
> has molded how you perceive yourself, your world, and
> your place in it – past, present, and future? What
> is the relationship between all of this and your
> perspective of "reality"? And, perhaps most
> important of all, what becomes of your "reality" if
> those perspectives change? You will be confronted
> with essays as well as films that will (hopefully)
> provoke these questions in your thinking and your
> writing, and push you to see and re-see who "you" are
> and to broaden your perspective not only of your
> "self" but your reality.

With this as the defining principle of the course, the roughly

fourteen-week classes were separated out into four units, each

of them exploring that question of "Identity, Individuality, and

Perspective" from a different angle, a different aspect of

"self," and each of them culminating in an essay that

articulates that exploration. The first of these dealt with the

question of how their educational experiences had defined how they perceived themselves, in particular, how they perceived themselves as "writers." What was the reality or "truth" of their existence as "writers"? Inherently, there was also the question of how the perceptions of others – teachers, family, peers – influenced how they defined themselves as "writers." In order to provoke those questions further, the students had to read Mike Rose's "I Just Wanna Be Average," Linda Brodkey's "Writing on the Bias," Richard Rodriguez' "Aria: A Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood," and Gloria Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue." The first essay, or "exploratory paper," of the class, "Your History as a 'Writer'," required them to:

> [A]nalyze how you have defined yourself as a "writer" through how you have been defined as a "writer" by others. How do you (or don't you) perceive yourself as a "writer" and, more importantly, *why*? What significance has writing had in your life and your world? What experiences, educational or not, have produced those perspectives? How have they been limited or broadened by these experiences? And, perhaps most important of all, what has been the result of all this?

With this "critical analysis" of their history as "writers," and with "writing" as a whole, the students were also to use one of those four essays, all of them "histories" as well, to supplement and complicate their own.

The issues and questions that informed the second unit of the class rose out of that question of the students as "writers." This second unit took those questions of reality and

"truth" – as well as the concepts of "relativism" and "Perception is reality" – and, pulling back, brought them to the students' greater existence as "individuals." At the heart of this second unit, then, was the question, "What is an 'individual'?" The students were asked what they had been "taught" about the reality or "truth" of the world and their place in it and how this had influenced their perspective of these? Furthermore, they were asked how all of this had affected their standing as "individuals." To help them try to explore these questions of "education" in the widest definition of the word, they had to read Plato's "The Allegory of the Cave," Maureen O'Hara & Walter Anderson's "Welcome to the Postmodern World," Doris Lessing's "Switching Off to See 'Dallas'," and Vincent Ruggiero's "Broaden Your Perspective." They also watched the 1998 film *American History X*, a poignant drama about a neo-Nazi skinhead "Derek Vinyard," played by Edward Norton, who goes to prison for a murder bred by his vicious biases but transforms during his incarceration through seeing himself and his world – as well as his crime and the ideologies that bred them – from a different perspective.

After mulling over those questions and this material that were arranged to deepen and complicate them, the second essay, "Your Definition of Your 'Self'," required them to do two things. The first was to critically analyze the film using one

of the readings and, quoting the assignment demanded in the film of Norton's younger brother and protégé, "Danny" (Edward Furlong), by a teacher the brothers both had, "Doctor Sweeney" (Avery Brooks), "[T]o analyze and interpret all the events surrounding Derek's incarceration. How these events helped to shape [his and Danny's] present perspective concerning life in contemporary America." In doing so, the students had to explore how Derek's perspectives had been shaped and molded by his environment, how his standing as an "individual" had been influenced by those experiences, and how, and why, his perceptions had eventually become broadened and "evolved." The second part of the essay was to bring this analysis to their own lives and worlds: their own sense of "self." As I wrote for the essay assignment:

> All of this should lead you to what is truly most important here: *YOU*. Like "Danny" does with his own essay, through your writing, I want you to "analyze and interpret" your own lives, perspectives, and "individuality." How have your own perspectives of yourself, the world, and your place in it been affected by your culture, your society, your relations, etc.? Have you gone through life following others' views, others' definitions of "truth," without ever questioning them? And what has been the result? What has influenced your definition of your "self" – and what has been the result? These are all questions you must ask yourselves before you can *truly* claim to be an "individual."

Put simply, half of the essay was an interpretation of *American History X* while the other half was a comparison of that meaning to how they perceived themselves as "individuals."

Similar to this second unit and the second essay, the third unit pulled back even further and brought those questions of

reality and "truth," perspective, and "self" to an even broader aspect of their identity: their existence as "males" and "females," "men" and "women." In essence, what is the difference between "sex" and "gender" and even "sexual orientation"? What is the relationship between them and what is the meaning of that relationship? For this third unit of the class, then, the students were asked to explore the questions of how perceptions of "men" and "women" define the reality or "truth" of what it means to be a "male" or a "female" in American society, what influences the exact nature of those definitions, and how such perceptions mold and shape their lives and their world – again, their sense of "self." The students had to read Aaron Devor's "Becoming Members of Society: Learning the Social Messages of Gender," Jean Kilbourne's "'Two Ways a Woman Can Get Hurt': Advertising and Violence," Jackson Katz' "Advertising and the Construction of Violent White Masculinity," and Alexa Hackbrath's "Vanity, Thy Name Is Metrosexual." In addition to these articles, the students also watched two documentaries: HBO's *Middle Sexes: Redefining He and She* from 2005 and the Discovery Channel's *Born a Boy, Brought Up a Girl* from 2006, both of which complicate further the "Nature versus Nurture" debate with regards to those questions of "sex" and "gender." These readings and documentaries and the freewriting, class discussions, and reading responses that were done about and around them brought the students to the third, and last, "exploratory paper" of the class, "What Makes a Man a 'Man' and a Woman a 'Woman'?" Inherent to this essay were the following questions:

> What is the relationship between gender and sex (and, to complicate things further, sexual orientation)? […] How do society and culture influence children's perceptions of what they will come to define as "male" and "female"? "Masculine" and "feminine"? Or is gender "natural," a thing predetermined by

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genetics and chemistry? Or is the issue more
complicated than such an "either/or" scenario? What
influence does mass media and popular culture
(television, films, music, advertisements, etc.) have
upon how "maleness" and "femaleness" are defined so
very commonly in American society? In the end, how
do individuals' perceptions of gender, both their own
and others', affect their identity: how they see
themselves?

With this sort of conversation at the heart of this third essay,
the students were asked to critically analyze their very own
"gender socialization." How exactly did they learn what it
means to be a "man" or a "woman" in American society and culture
and how did this influence their perception of the reality or
"truth" of "sex" and "gender"? Were those perceptions narrowed
or broadened because of such influences? Furthermore, what has
been expected of them as "men" or "women" in this society, how
have they responded to such expectations, and, lastly, to what
influence upon how they perceived their identities – their
"selves"? To undertake such an exploration, the students were
required to use one of the readings as well as an "outside
source" found through their own research to analyze their own
experiences with "sex" and "gender."

The fourth and final unit of the class was structured
around the students' final writing assignment: a Research
Paper. The basic question of their research paper was this:
"How does the mass media influence the perceptions of its
audience?" In many ways, this question had pervaded the
conversation of the class from the beginning of the semester.

However, because the students had to specify the "variables" of that question – What particular "mass media" product? What particular "influence" and upon what particular "perceptions"? Whose "perceptions"? What particular "audience"? – it afforded them a great deal of room to pursue their very own personal interests. Ideally, I wanted students to mold and shape that question based upon what they felt had relevance or significance to their own experiences and identity: how they perceived the reality or "truth" of their world and their place in it and how those perceptions influenced their sense of "self." Furthermore, as I stated in the assignment: "What I want you to do is come to a research question of your own that exhibits uncertainty and, thus, will allow you to explore what you DON'T know about some issue." But the exploration of those thusly developed questions was only a part of the research paper.

Because the research paper was based upon the "I-Search Paper" model, the assignment was also very much a "*meta*-research paper," demanding that students reflect upon their research: to explain their process, their findings, their analysis, and their conclusion. As a result, their final report was separated into these respective parts, much like a laboratory report. Furthermore, besides this step-by-step method of the final report, the research itself was also separated into required parts: a research question and proposal, an annotated

bibliography, and a final report, which itself went through a drafting process. The journey that was the students' research projects ended with in-class research presentations during the last three or four days of the course.

Now that I have described the progression of my courses' units and essays, I would take a step back and try to offer my rationale - my philosophy - behind them. I based the courses I taught at the University of Delaware, as well as most of those before them, upon that thematic foundation of "Identity, Individuality, and Perspective" because I have deemed this essential conversation of the "self" that it establishes a fertile breeding ground, so to speak, for the arousing of and confrontation with perplexity and relativism. However, this can only – *only* – happen if the conversation is formulated in such a way that it exists, dynamically, as a dialectic. A liminal space where what was before concrete and set in stone – again, "fixed and immutable," "absolute and unshakeable" – in terms of perceptions of the "self" faces the possibility of disruption, of dissolution. A "contact zone" of the sort announced by Mary Louise Pratt in her "Arts of the Contact Zone," where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34) and where, amidst this conflict, the writing "self" "undertake[s] to describe [itself] in ways that engage with representations others have

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made of them" (35). For this very reason, I also deem those
different issues at the heart of the course's units as naturally
allowing for that dialectic to occur because each of them
represent definitions of "self" that, very often with freshman
college students, rise out of strictly black or white,
"either/or" perspectives. "I know what it means to be a 'man'
because I was born a 'male'." "We are all individuals in our
own way." "I am not a 'writer' and I hate writing." These are
statements of the "self" that have been declared with utter
certainty by students in my writing classes.

All of the readings and the films and the class discussions
and the writings, whether freewritings or reading responses or
exploratory papers, are designed to disrupt that certainty in
students in my writing classes. And through offering possible
experiences with uncertainty, they are also designed to unveil
perplexity and relativism to those students' perspectives of the
reality or "truth" of the issues therein. The first unit serves
as the foundation for the second and the second for the third,
each further deepening those questions of the "self." Simply
put, as the course unfolds, those units and the issues therein
are supposed to leave the students asking themselves, "If *this*
is not so very 'true' but only made to *appear* 'true,'" what else
can that be said about?" The purpose of this inward questioning
and critical exploration of the "self" is that it can then be

turned *outward*, towards society and those who live all around them in the world, the students asking themselves that same question again and again.

Very simply, if the students realize perplexity and relativism over aspects of the "self," perhaps they will realize that such a thing can be found elsewhere – beyond the "self." The content of the course is rooted in my teaching philosophy's dialectical roots, a dialectic I have tried to foster – successfully or not – between "expressivism" and "critical literacy" and I contend that the conflicting and contrary definitions of "self" that are experienced by students throughout the course's different units are those which, in many ways, are similar to the conflicting and contrary perspectives of the "self" upon which each of these theoretical schools would seek to converge. What is an utter necessity, though, is that *dialectic*: one perspective of the reality or "truth" of the "self," as Elbow wrote of his "cooking," again, "being seen through the lens of another, being dragged through the guts of another, being reoriented in terms of the other, being mapped onto the other." Again, what is an utter necessity is that "mutual deformation." The depth of "self" then, and the writing done from that "self," is dependent upon the extremity of the dialectic between those contrary definitions of "self."

With all of this as the reasoning behind why I constructed the writing course as I did that year at the University of Delaware, it was really only worth the writing that the students did for the class, both inside and outside of the classroom. Writing begins through freewriting at the beginning of most class days for a period of five or more minutes. These freewritings were framed by a prompt related to, in general, the theme of that unit and, in particular, the issues and questions to be discussed that day in class. These freewritings asked students to articulate their thoughts upon some question or concern. Furthermore, those prompts were fashioned so that they asked students to perceive those experiences and perspectives in ways they may not have otherwise, thus positioning them as critical observers of those very same experiences and perspectives.

Outside of the classrooms, reading responses attempted to continue this same agenda of not only the personal articulation of perspectives of reality and "truth" based upon their own experiences and knowledge but also the questioning of those perspectives based upon a dialogue with some reading or some film. The four essays – the three exploratory papers and the research paper – that were assigned throughout the semester attempted to exist as means for students to enter into the whole conversation of not simply some particular unit but the course

as a whole. These essays attempted to urge the students to not

simply state their perspectives upon some issue through an

articulation of their experiences and social and cultural

knowledge and "truths," but, through entering into a critical

dialogue with the readings they have done and the films they had

viewed and the in-class discussions they had had about the

whole, to re-see those perspectives, to complicate and

problemitize them, whatever the result. In this way, they were

supposed to use their own interests and values and lived

experiences as a base of authority from which to write and from

which to reflect upon and to question course "texts," whether

the readings, the films, or the class discussions. However,

they were also supposed to use those same "texts" to reflect

upon and to question those same interests and values and lived

experiences. Thus, their writing was supposed to urge them to

see not simply that they were the recipients of social and

cultural influences, but, furthermore, the deconstructors and

reconstructors of those influences as well. In this way, the

whole of the writing for the class was intended to allow them to

perceive themselves as *more* than social and cultural products.

But what was my place in all of this, as a teacher?

Through the way I positioned myself in class discussions and the

way I responded to their writing, the relationship I took with

that "self" that was exhibited by students was as a promoter of

discussions and a poser of questions. In some ways, my role

could be seen somewhat as the "Devil's Advocate." However, the

intention behind this was not to raise questions or stir

controversy simply for the sake of contradiction alone but to

urge students to recognize and avoid assumptions and to

complicate and question generalized perspectives of reality or

"truth." While I initiated this "dialogue" with my students,

the nature of their responses or reactions, however, was on

their terms, not mine. In terms of my feedback, my margin and

end comments to their writing and their thinking therein were

offered not prescriptively, telling them what was wrong with

what they were writing or what they were thinking therein and

how they should write or think in more "correct" (i.e. my)

terms, but, as well as I could, much more like Dewey's "forked

road": presenting them with different, perhaps as yet unseen or

unknown, possibilities of perceiving some issue or experience.

What they did with these other ways of seeing and reseeing the

reality or "truth" of their world and their place in it and

their senses of "self" defined in those terms was based wholly

upon, again, their own terms. It was up to them to do with what

they would such different or even conflicting possibilities.

There was an admittedly social and culturally reformative and

progressive nature to the course and the writing done throughout

it; however, for this intention to be made a reality, the

students had to do it from and for their own worlds and definitions of "self" – *not* mine. For such an intention to have any *true* reformative or progressive potential, I had to acknowledge the fact that students will *not* perceive themselves, their world, and their "truths" any differently than they did before they entered my course unless they *want* to, or are simply *prepared* to. To do otherwise, to tell students "how it is" and to evaluate them according to their reception and rehashing of "how it is," akin to the sopping up of water by a sponge, would be a betrayal of that potential.

But how did this translation of my teaching philosophy – arising from that dialectic between Certainty and Uncertainty – through that freshman writing course that year at University of Delaware turn out? What became of its "operationalization" through the class sequence and content I have described? What happened to all the "potential" and "promise" I have heretofore been proclaiming? I would leave it to the next chapter, my last, to say.

V.

    The question before me then is simple and straightforward.

And it is a question that I know I *have* to ask myself, like that

proverbial long, hard look in the mirror to see what you find

looking back at you. To see what you're really worth. Again,

that question is: *what happened?* What happened with those

attempts to translate my philosophy of writing and the teaching

of writing, a philosophy arising out of the work of John Dewey

and William Perry and Peter Elbow and founded upon a pursuance

of the dialectic between Certainty and Uncertainty, into actual

practice with those writing courses at the University of

Delaware? Like I said before, what happened to the "potential"

and the "promise" I have been proclaiming for page after page

now?

    When I look back to that year at University of Delaware or

at any of the other freshman writing courses I have taught

before, whether Montclair State or Stony Brook or Widener, I see

very little transformation and very little triumph. When I look

back at those writing courses and the students in them and, in

doing so, do indeed take that long, hard look in the mirror,

what I see leaves me dispirited because I do not see the teacher

I have wanted to be since I decided to become a teacher of

writing all those years ago now. It is not that I see a "bad"

teacher staring back at me. A lazy teacher or a disengaged

teacher or simply an incompetent teacher. No. It is that I do

not see in that reflection the sort of writing teacher I had

worked so very, very hard to be, the writing teacher who exists,

to his students, as an inciter of, as Hélène Cixous wrote,

"understanding the incomprehensible, facing the invisible,

hearing the inaudible, thinking the unthinkable" and as a

provoker of that experience with that "lightning region that

takes your breath away, where you instantaneously feel at sea

and where the moorings are severed with the already-written, the

already-known." Despite my hard work and despite my best

efforts, it didn't happen for me.

 Please allow me to pause for a moment. I do not want to

put before you a portrait of my teaching experiences that is

nothing but the withering on the vine of that "potential" and

"promise." No. Again, I was not – am not - a "bad" writing

teacher. I believe, in many ways, I *was* a good writing teacher

and what made me a "good" writing teacher more than anything

else, I believe, was the fact that I saw myself as a *writer* more

than I saw myself as a teacher and, because of that, I *believed*

in writing. I believed in the transformative "potential" of

writing. I believed in the writing's "promise" of triumph. And

I brought this "belief" with me to the classroom as a teacher of

writing. I expected a lot from those students' writing and, in

turn, they began to expect a lot from their writing and

themselves as writers – perhaps more than they ever had before.

Those students would come to know very well that I would not

accept mediocrity because I wanted to read their very best and I

wanted *them* to see their very best. They would also come to

know that I was there to push them - to write. I pushed them

not simply to write more, in terms of the number of words upon

their pages and the number of pages held between their staples,

but to write *freer* and to write *deeper* and to write *further* and

to write more *deliberately*.

From the start of the semester to the end, I pushed and I

pushed and I pushed – and, through it all, I pushed that

dialectic between Certainty and Uncertainty as far as I could.

When all was said and done, I believe those students left the

course more comfortable with writing and more confident in their

own writing. I also believe that those students knew to be much

more conscious of whom they were writing for and what exactly

they were looking to "say" to that audience. Of the "flow" of

their writing and how the overall construction of their writing

influenced what they were working to say with it. To explain

their thoughts and meanings, as well as those of anyone or

anything else they should bring to their writing, as thoroughly

as they can. And last but definitely not least, to use their

writing to pose that "Why?" not simply outwards, towards others,

but inwards, to themselves, and to pursue it tenaciously and vehemently because, as I told them time and again, it was a question that would set them free. Many of these "lessons" became a mantra of sorts throughout the semester, in particular the very last, because of how often I reiterated how utterly crucial they were to those students' writing and their existences as writers. Whether they exited the course loving or hating to write, these were lessons they would never forget. Can this be said for *all* of those students that year? No. *Most* of them? I cannot say. *Some* of them? I would say so.

Despite all of this, however, as I confessed before, although I was not a "bad" writing teacher, when all was said and done and those courses at the University of Delaware were over, I was not the writing teacher whom I had tried to be, whom I had wanted to be, because the very basic intentions of my particular teaching philosophy, which I have hitherto now been trying to explain and to explore, went unrealized. Despite how much I had deliberated over and over again upon the selection and sequence of the readings and films I put before those students, the planning of the classroom discussions about the questions which those readings and films were supposed to raise, and the construction of the writing assignments I required those students to undertake as well as the scrutiny of the various drafts that came from them, I do not believe that this

particular teaching philosophy of mine, defined by the founding

of that dialectic between Uncertainty and Certainty, was

"operationalized," at least not to any overwhelming degree.

Those students wrote a lot throughout their respective semesters

and, by the end of them, very well wrote better than they did

before. But did they leave my writing class having engendered

John Dewey's "reflective thinking," the "[a]ctive, persistent,

and careful consideration of any belief or supported form of

knowledge" that comes from "overcoming the inertia that inclines

one to accept suggestions at their face value […] [and the]

willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and

disturbance"? Or William Perry's "relativistic pragmatism," the

"perceiv[ing] [of] all knowledge and values (including

authority's) as contextual and relativistic and subordinates

dualistic right-wrong functions to the status of a special case,

in context," eventually culminating with "experience[ing] the

affirmation of identity among multiple responsibilities and

realiz[ing] Commitment as an ongoing, unfolding activity"? Or

Peter Elbow's "cooking," the "interaction of contrasting or

conflicting material" that is a "process of one piece of

material […] being transformed by interacting with another: one

piece of material being seen through the lens of another, being

dragged through the guts of another, being reoriented or

reorganized in terms of the other, being mapped onto the other"?

Again, if I took that long, hard look in the mirror, the answer would be … No.

The next question I must ask myself then, is: *what happened*? Why did I not accomplish what I had wanted to accomplish with those freshman writing courses at the University of Delaware, in terms of that dialectic and everything therein? Where did the problem lie exactly? Was the problem with the philosophy, whether mine or where it originated with the theories of Dewey or Perry or Elbow, or was the problem with me – my teaching practice? In the end, the problem was me. But what exactly *was* the problem - with me? With my teaching practice? With the translation of my philosophy of writing and the teaching of writing? In order to find some answers to these questions, I will undertake a small survey of the results and conclusions of other compositionists who have tried to do similar things with their writing courses and their students within them – and with greater success than I'd had at realizing those philosophies of Elbow and Perry and Dewey. What had they done that I hadn't? And what had I done that they hadn't?

While this survey is a little difficult because there is some overlapping, I would start with those compositionists whose theories and research are rooted in the work of John Dewey for the simple sake of chronology. Regardless, two names from the field are most prominent here: Donald Jones and Stephen

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Fishman. While the likes of Janet Emig and Peter Elbow have written about Dewey over the years, Jones and Fishman seem to have put the most concentrated effort behind, as the latter writes in a 1993 contribution to *College Composition and Communication*, "the explication of Dewey's work and its consequences for composition" (315), the two having either published or presented six essays between them towards such an end throughout the mid-'90s.

Jones' essays, for the most part, seek to demonstrate the roots of the "process" theories and practices of Peter Elbow and Donald Murray in Dewey's "non-foundational," "experimental," and "pragmatic" philosophy, whose "series of dynamic relationships between knowledge, language, and experience" ("A Pragmatic Reconstruction …" 2) allow for "the assertion of contingent beliefs possible without promising the final closure of absolute certainty" ("Beyond the Postmodern Impasse of Agency" 86) and, through this, offer the potential for "profound philosophical and social transformations" (88). The purpose for pursuing those congruities, whether conscious debts or not, is two fold for Jones: first, to defend through philosophical explanation the "most effective practices" of those "process" proponents like Elbow and Murray from the "anti-foundational" critiques like those articulated by Lester Faigley, Patricia Bizzell, and James Berlin and, second, to critique the "agentless

subjectivity" of those same "postmodern" compositionists because

their theories' essential "dangerous dichotomy between thought

and language" ("Beyond the Postmodern Impasse of Agency" 81) and

"binary opposition between the individual and the social" ("John

Dewey and Peter Elbow" 271) not only "undermine[s] the agency of

the students and the authority of the instructor" ("Beyond …"

83) but, furthermore, "the very social theory and practice they

seem to privilege" ("John Dewey …" 272).

In Jones' 1996 essay for *JAC*, "Beyond the Postmodern

Impasse of Agency: The Resounding Relevance of John Dewey," the

purpose of his suggestions for bringing "Deweyan pragmatism" to

the writing class is for students to claim agency over how they

think, how they write, and even how they live by realizing their

potential to become "active participants" in the dynamic

relationship between those phenomena. For Jones, such a thing

can happen through understanding the "transactional

relationship, meaning a mutually influential interaction" (94)

between, again, "knowledge, language, and experience," thus

"considering discourse as a social product and operation,

meaning a product and a process" (94). As he asserts:

> During their transmission of language, individuals
> can reflexively reconsider its influence. They can
> become agents and practice the positive freedom to
> act by reconstructing accepted beliefs and ways of
> believing. This reconstruction is possible because
> experience and knowledge influence language as much
> as language influences them. (94)

Put simply, "These imaginative recombinations can lead to the reconstruction of prior beliefs because these conceptual alternatives can be considered and compared" (95) and, thus, "knowledge always retains a tentativeness." For the "Deweyan instructor" who would help to train his writing students to become such "agents" through this extremely dialectical "reconstructive collaboration" to whose utter significance he testifies, Jones necessitates two things. The first acknowledges "the primacy of experience," what he calls "the starting point of a pragmatist writing course" (89), and involves "developing knowledge from experience" through "identify[ing] and examin[ing] felt difficulties through Dewey's experimental method of inquiry." The means of this for students is the personal narrative, yet with "a social turn":

> The student would narrate a significant life
> experience, yet a Deweyan instructor would ask the
> student to reflect not just on the significance of
> the experience itself but also on the cultural
> assumptions implicit within the narration which
> influence [those] reflections. (90)

The place of the "Deweyan instructor" in this writing is to confront the student writer with questions: questions that are "not usually posed in process-oriented draft comments and writing conferences" (90) and do not require "a desired outcome on a debatable issue" (91) but that would bring attention to those "cultural influences" and "cultural assumptions" revealed in that student's writing. In conjunction with this experience-

reflecting writing and those questions that need to be put to it

is the second thing Jones deems crucial for the founding of a

"Deweyan" writing course. This second requirement acknowledges

the "influence of language" and is supposed to "teach students

to be cognizant of the tremendous effect of language upon

thought" (92). For Jones, this is done through peer response,

explaining:

> A Deweyan instructor would use peer response to
> encourage student writers and their responders to
> realize their immersion in these large and small
> discursive currents. […][W]hen a writer and a
> responder disagree, they may risk being pulled under
> if they fail to realize the danger of crossing
> discursive riptides. A Deweyan instructor would
> encourage students to consider whether a contentious
> counterstatement in analytical responding, for
> example, represents more than "just someone else's
> opinion." (93)

It would seem that, for Jones, this peer response is almost more

significant for would-be "Deweyan instructors" who would urge

their students to undertake that process of "reconstructive

collaboration." The "contentious counterstatements" offered by

student's peers can represent, perhaps more immediately,

evidence of the same "cultural assumptions," as one student's

"truth" does not represent another's, thus the response group

witnessing those "discursive riptides" first hand. While Jones'

essay for *JAC* is not what I would call "heavy" research, not

unlike his other explications of the significance of Dewey's

philosophy to the field of composition and rhetoric, throughout

it he does reference his experiences from "a process-oriented

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first-year writing course" (90) and, therein, "one student named Brian [who] wrote about trying to maintain a friendship with an openly gay student named Todd" (90). While the suggestions to that "Deweyan instructor" that arise out of his course and his student "Brian" are more along the lines of what he "should have done," what is there does testify to their effectiveness towards achieving those "Deweyan" ends, in particular with the influence of peer response.

While Donald Jones' research, again, may not be staggeringly deep – and it was not intended to be so - my greatest interest in his essay, truth be told, is the fact that what is there serves to corroborate another Dewey-heralding essay from that same year, 1993: Stephen Fishman's "Explicating Our Tacit Tradition: John Dewey and Composition Studies." Like Jones, Fishman seeks to corroborate the field of composition's indebtedness to Dewey, thus, hopefully, bringing his philosophy to the forefront of composition theory and research. Also like Jones, Fishman would do so by relating Dewey's philosophy to the theories and practice of a "contemporary expressivist," namely Peter Elbow. And like Jones, the practical advice for writing instructors who would teach in accord with Dewey's philosophy, like myself, that arises from his thusly intended explanations revolve around the vital influence of peer response, Fishman claiming, "[T]he concept of community remains central to Dewey's

work" (318). For me, it is this similarity with Jones that I am

most concerned with. Explaining the purpose of his particular

focus, Fishman writes: "[F]or Dewey, successful composition

courses help students want to do more writing. And to encourage

students to want to do more writing, successful composition

teachers help students gain power to establish and contribute to

writing groups" (316). Upon this, he continues:

> [T]he primary motivator and tool for helping students
> want to do more writing, Dewey would say, is
> students' learning that writing is a cooperative
> process. He would want them to know how to get
> response to their work and how to use that response.
> […] In sum, Dewey would tell us that composition
> courses, although concerned with each individual's
> writing skills, should primarily be about writing
> communities, about developing students' abilities to
> establish, join, and contribute to them. (318)

According to Fishman, these writing communities are formed

through communication, communication not simply through "common

language" but of "common experience." Simply put, "[O]nly when

people identify with one another can they share experiences and

understand one another's meaning" (320). For this to happen,

Fishman contends that Dewey had put forward two "principle[s] of

community formation": "Relativity" and "Diversity." Of the

first, he explains, "[O]ccasions must be provided for people to

identify with one another's point of view. [Dewey] tells us

that to form community we must help people engage in enough

joint activities so that they can play different roles" (320).

And the second is complimentary, Fishman explaining:

> [T]he basis for joint action, according to Dewey, is
> developing ways of talking so that people can explore
> and utilize their idiosyncrasies. […] For Dewey,
> once people have forums for communicating their
> differences, they can discover their common interests
> and use their idiosyncrasies to enhance, rather than
> impede, their work. (321)

In this way, Dewey's Relativity and Diversity function as a dialectic, one affecting the other, and, for Fishman, taken as a whole, they find their most profound translation into writing classroom practice in the form of, not surprisingly, peer response. Following such explanations, he describes his observations of those principles at work in "a freshman composition class" he had attended. In that writing class, he observed students "carrying out Dewey's idea that a group becomes a community when its members exchange roles and develop common experiences" (321) and, conversely, "making unique contributions to a developing common project" (321-2). In doing so, the students in question "identif[ied] a common goal without submerging their differences" (322).

For Fishman, this back and forth movement between the common and the uncommon, the similar and the dissimilar – the certain and the uncertain – serves a greater purpose than simply urging students "to do more writing." Like Jones, the formation of that "community" of student writers, whether it is the peer response group or the writing class as a whole, can lead to opportunities for "reconstruction," of not only what is written

but what is thought and, possibly, what is experienced – what is

lived. It is no different than Jones' "reconstructive

collaboration." As Fishman asserts, "[T]he effect of

participation in such communities is that members may examine

and reform their original points of view" (322). But such a

thing happens outside of peer response also, very well *because*

of what happens during peer response. He explains further:

> As the writer, during composition, transacts with her
> beliefs, she must decide which to conserve and which
> to reform. As the writer transacts with her
> culture's beliefs, she must decide which cultural
> beliefs to accept and which to resist. And as she
> transacts with her developing text, she must choose
> her genre and decide how much of it to reshape in
> carrying forward her work. This means, according to
> Dewey, that the individual's writing is always a
> mutual reshaping of author, culture, and text. It is
> never just private but always private and social,
> personal and political: to change one's text is also
> to change one's self and one's culture. (323)

Because of this, the community "reconstructs" the individual as

much as the individual "reconstructs" the community, the two in

a dialectical relationship that offers the promise of the

"growth" of the whole. And in his essay, Fishman testifies to

having observed that same growth with the students he observed,

namely "Ramona," a female student writer. He writes: "[H]er

writing group's sense of community enabled her to overcome her

initial resistance to her classmates' comments and, as a result,

enabled her to reconstruct her discussion" (327). Furthermore,

"Ramona" had confessed to Fishman her "increasing

comfortableness with her writing group's comments and her

increasing recognition that she wanted to write more" (327).

From Fishman's conclusions upon what he had observed in that

freshman writing class, it would seem that, without that

immersion in such a "community" of other writers - with their

similarities and their differences but all of themworking

towards similar goals – students like Fishman's "Ramona" would

not have experienced that "reconstruction" and "reshaping": of

her writing and of her thinking, of her self and of her culture.

These are conclusions that Fishman would further three

years later in an essay, co-written by Lucille Parkinson

McCarthy, for *College Composition and Communication*, "Teaching

for Student Change: A Deweyan Alternative to Radical Pedagogy."

McCarthy had observed Fishman's "Introduction to Philosophy"

course, comprised of "a group of 19 students from a variety of

majors who took the class to satisfy a graduation requirement"

(348), and the resulting essay was their report of those

observations, and what meaning they made of what she had seen.

For Fishman and McCarthy, the key not simply to "school

learning" but "social reform" was the promotion of the "skills

and virtues of cooperative inquiry" (345). To that end, Fishman

and McCarthy contend that, for that "cooperative inquiry" to

happen, a new aspect of the classroom community must be put in

place: "[T]eachers and students must alternate roles to develop

common understanding" (346). About this additional requirement

of the "Deweyan" community – the teacher as "learner" – they explain that, during McCarthy's observation, "Students were responding in a way that suggested they saw Fishman as a learner and that they had information which he and their classmates needed" (351), thus deepening that "opportunity for conjoint exploration and evaluation of alternative points of view" (352).

Fishman's adoption of the role of "learner" would seem to have happened because he presented himself to them as a neutral "questioner." Because of this, then, while they had witnessed "slow, piecemeal change," there was change nonetheless in terms of how Fishman's students perceived "truth," realizing that "[A]ll claims – religious, political, scientific, and ethical – are social constructions, fallible and always subject to revision" (347). Such was the case with Fishman's student "Eric," who, while he "steadfastly denied that [his] experiences [in Fishman's class] […] had changed [his] fundamental beliefs," in reality, "provides […] a portrait of a student in the midst of reconstruction. His position fluctuates, changing from one example to the next, and he clings to old views while acknowledging contradictory new ones" (359). Again, without that "community," with Fishman as a fellow "learner" and "questioner" rather than as "leader," Fishman's "Eric" would not have undergone that "reconstruction," regardless of the fact that it was "gradual and halting, not dramatic and decisive"

(359). According to Dewey's philosophy, such "reconstruction" –

"growth" and "rethinking" – should never be "decisive" but,

rather, know no end.

The truly critical weight placed upon peer revision,

"community," and the place of the writing teacher not outside of

it but inside, deep within it, and also the crucial influence of

all of this upon that "reconstructive collaboration," whereby

students' writing exists as, again, "a mutual reshaping of

author, culture, and text," and through which perceptions of

truth and "reailty" are seen as, again, "social constructions,

fallible and always subject to revision," is shared by those

composition theorists and researches who, rather than John

Dewey, would espouse the work of William Perry and, therein, his

"relativistic pragmatism." At the 1984 Conference on College

Composition and Communication in New York City, Susan E. Beers

presented a paper titled "An Analysis of the Interaction Between

Students' Epistemological Assumptions and the Composing

Process." In her essay, Beers describes Perry's scheme of

"student's conception of knowledge" (4), his "naïve

epistemological theories of students" as she called it, and how

students at the different stages therein could be expected to

write, Beers contending that "the Perry Scheme […] has

implications for how the process of writing and learning to

write are themselves viewed" (6). Thereafter, Beers poses the

question, "Can writing be used to foster epistemological

development?" While she admits that she cannot answer the

question, stating that "no prescription for such an endeavor can

be written at this time" (11), she does offer her strong

suspicions based upon her support of Perry's theories. For

Beers, it would seem that the most significant thing that needs

to happen in the writing classroom for that "epistemological

development" to begin is the experience with "incongruities" and

the use of writing to explore those "incongruities." She

writes, "[T]eachers may serve to facilitate change either by

making the student aware of the incongruities evident in his or

her writing, or by suggesting alternatives to viewpoints that

the student realizes are inadequate" (11). Be this as it may,

Beers' suggestion remained theoretical at the time her paper was

presented and, although she describes two then-ongoing studies

in support of Perry's Scheme – Dr. Michael P. Ryan's at the

University of Texas at San Antonio and her very own at Sweet

Briar College – she called for others to further such research,

writing:

> To what extent does [my] analysis provide a valid and
> useful conceptualization of the relationship between
> epistemological beliefs and writing? A major impetus
> in my writing of this paper is to challenge
> researchers to put the above hypothesis to empirical
> test. (9)

Curiously enough, this "empirical test" that Beers had

hoped for came the next year with Nancy S. Shapiro's "Rhetorical

Maturity and Perry's Model of Intellectual Development: A Study

of College Students' Writing and Thinking," a report submitted

to the NCTE Promising Researcher Award Competition. It was

based upon a quantitative research project she had undertaken

with a "sample of 70 essays […] drawn from a data bank at the

Center for Applications of Developmental Instruction (CADI) at

the University of Maryland, College Park" (10), the "population

represented […] includ[ing] both traditional and nontraditional

aged undergraduate and graduate students across a broad spectrum

of majors" (10). The purpose of Shapiro's research project was,

as she states in her abstract, to "investigate the relationship

between the intellectual maturity of college students and

evidence of rhetorical maturity in their writing." Later, she

explains herself further:

> The purpose of this study was to clarify some
> elements of the relationship between the intellectual
> maturity of college students and their writing
> ability in general. […] As researchers and
> teachers, we should not take for granted the notion
> that college students who are maturing
> intellectually, that is, recognizing and coming to
> terms with the complexity of reality, are by
> definition, automatically improving their ability to
> communicate those new ideas and understandings in
> writing. (1)

From this, she puts her research question simply: "The question

raised in this research is whether [college student writers']

skills at communicating subtlety, uniqueness, and depth of

thought keep pace with their growing intellectual complexity"

(2). In order to approach some understanding of this question,

Shapiro took those seventy essays and scrutinized them by way of "Measure of Intellectual Development (MID)" (7-8), the "Diedrich Scale" (8-9), and the "Levels of Context Scale" (9-12), for "Rhetorical Maturity," "a term borrowed from Susan Miller (1980) who coined it in an attempt to capture the quality that is missing from the poor papers written by unskilled adult writers" (4) and that is defined by "language competence," the ability "to arrive at and limit a topic, and develop and organize a text," and the "awareness of audience." For Shapiro, the results gathered through such research instrumentation offered a very clear answer: "[S]tudents' texts which had been identified on the MID at higher levels of cognitive development scored significantly higher on the Diedrich Scale than students' texts which had been characterized at lower levels of cognitive development" (12). But what does this *mean* exactly? She explains:

> The results of this study indicate that levels of cognitive development among college students do have a significant relationship to their writing competence. […] According to Perry (1970), students at dualistic levels of cognitive development think in a qualitatively different way from students who have matured from that limited egocentric, right/wrong perspective into Multiplicity, and Contextual Relativism which allow for multiple perspective taking. (15)

Furthermore, she claims that, "Theoretically, the movement from an egocentric to a decentered perspective should manifest itself in an awareness of alternative points of view. The evidence

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presented here supports that hypothesis" (15). To Shapiro,

however, this "evidence" raises more questions than it answers,

the most begging of these being, "Do students at higher levels

of intellectual maturity write better because they think better,

or is it possible that the act of writing itself generates the

disequilibrium which leads to cognitive development" (18)?

While she frames her question as "a classic 'chicken or egg'

quandary," with her reports' contention that "Rhetorical

Maturity" is greatly determined by "contextual relativism" (3),

"the writer's ability to accommodate to his readers" (6) and

"assess […] readers' needs more accurately" (15), her evidence

would seem to assert, implicitly, the necessity of those student

writers' working, writing and thinking, within a "community," an

audience and, thusly, a context for which and in which to write,

as well as its heavy influence upon that relationship between

their "intellectual maturity" and their "rhetorical maturity,"

the two very likely existing within a dialectic, the one pushing

and pulling the other. Again, "reconstructive collaboration."

   This heavy influence would be defined much more explicitly

in the early '90s with two other research essays: Sue Dinitz

and Jean Kiedaisch's "Persuasion from an Eighteen-Year-Old's

Perspective" from 1990 and Toni-Lee Capossela's "Using William

Perry's Scheme to Encourage Critical Writing." With them both,

that "community" of student writers, as well as the writing

instructor's standing within such a community, became more and more of a prominent thing within Perry's scheme, its crucial presence evinced through the further observations and subsequent conclusions offered by those two essays. Dinitz and Kiedaisch published their findings in the *Journal of Teaching Writing* in 1990. They had observed, seemingly, their own freshman writing course, the students in which had been asked to "'persuade the other members of your workshop group to change their minds and/or behavior on any topic of your choice'"(209). For Dinitz and Kiedaisch, the purpose of this assignment was "to teach students why and how to make writing choices based on their audience" (209). What they saw left them scratching their heads:

> [T]his assignment turned out to be puzzlingly difficult; many first-year students seemed unable or unwilling to make writing choices based on what would influence their audience. [...] They treated their audience analyses as mechanical exercises: they had few questions, spent little time, and wrote a composite essay, as if all the students were exactly the same. When they shared drafts, some of them ignored suggestions, seemingly not caring whether their peers were persuaded. (210)

After sorting through different possibilities for why this had happened, they finally turned to William Perry (and Jean Piaget) to "explain choices our students made in writing [their] persuasive essays" (209) and there they would seem to have found what they were looking for. The crux of the meaning they had made of this situation with their students' assignment, as read

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through Perry's philosophy, is that, "[E]ven with practice and a clear, genuine context, some students might have problems" (212). Why? They explain:

> Perry's work suggests that many eighteen-year-olds
> are struggling to maintain their dualistic world view
> and so may not be open to an assignment which
> requires them to take multiple points of view. […]
> Does it make sense, then, to try to teach them
> persuasion at this time? (217)

This said, they offer their conclusion: "Rather than blaming our students for not working hard or questioning the quality of our teaching, we now attribute some of their problems to their present state of cognitive or ethical/intellectual development" (219). From their observations of those students' attempts to compose those persuasive essays and the explanation offered through William Perry's scheme as to why the assignment had been "puzzlingly difficult" for those students, they do indeed arrive at suggestions for other writing teachers who face the same situation they had, whether there is a "persuasive essay" in question or not. They write:

> Perry […] suggest[s] that formal education can
> actually encourage cognitive growth […] initiated by
> some experience of disequilibrium […] facilitated by
> interaction with peers […][who] often cause students
> to question their assumptions about the nature and
> location of knowledge and values. (217)

With this perspective established, they continue, explaining the implications for teaching of what they had witnessed:

> [Our students] must view their peers rather than
> their teacher as the "real" audience of their essays.
> And this will not happen if the teacher is the
> evaluator of the papers: the groups must participate

> in responding to drafts, in conferencing with the
> teacher, and in evaluating the final drafts. Once
> students are genuinely writing to each other, they
> need to see the importance of analyzing their
> audience and of making writing choices based on that
> audience. To do this, students need to be given lots
> of time and encouragement to interact with each other
> […]. They have to be encouraged to tell each other
> not just whether their essays were "good," but
> whether their essays "worked" […]. (219)

Dinitz and Kiedaisch's advice – the utter significance of a community of "peers" in the rousing of that "disequilibrium" necessary for the evolution of a relativistic perspective of "truth" and reality - should ring very familiar by now. While they are working from out of Perry's philosophy, it echoes resoundingly the conclusions offered by Jones and Fishman and their respective "Deweyan" studies. Without those peers, writing for those peers and receiving feedback from those peers, student writers may not progress out of a "dualistic world view" and use writing as anything other than a tool for transcribing the black or white "already-known." They may never, again, "question their assumptions about the nature and location of knowledge and values."

This is also the same theoretical stance taken by Toni-Lee Capossela in her contribution to *The Critical Writing Workshop: Designing Writing Assignments to Foster Critical Writing*, a collection that Capossela had herself edited. Although her essay is basically theoretical in nature, her conclusions and suggestions therein indeed come out of her own, seemingly

considerable, experience with student writers and her attempts

to work with them and their writing through practical

applications of Perry's epistemological scheme. To Capossela,

because "the more advanced positions of Perry's continuum are

parallel to the disposition and attitudes characteristic of

critical thinking" (55), the conclusions he had offered about

his research study at Harvard are crucial to an understanding,

for teachers of writing, of that titular "critical writing."

According to Capossela's reading of Perry's cognitive theories,

"relativism" and "context and relationships" are inseparable,

existing within a dialectic and defined by a "reconstructive

collaboration." Because of that "relativism," she contends that

Perry's scheme is "concerned with process as well as product,

with how a student proceeds as well as the outcome of the

enterprise" (55). She explains the consequence of Perry's

emphasis upon "process":

> [I]n some ways critical thinking – and
> cognitive maturity – are never achieved once
> and for all. […] For Perry, intellectual
> adulthood is marked by the ability to live with
> uncertainty and lack of closure. Perhaps the
> most challenging aspect of the Perry scheme is
> that it is by definition open-ended:
> commitment is meaningful only if it is
> undertaken with an understanding that it may
> have to be abandoned, adjusted, or transferred
> at any moment. In addition, as one enters new
> areas of inquiry, one can expect to travel the
> earlier stages all over again. (55)

And because she claims that the "crucial nature of context lies

at the heart of relativism" (56) and that "the undeniable

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relevance of context is what finally forces one to abandon the
comforting dualistic belief in permanent right answers to all
the important questions" (56), what we have, yet again, is a
testimonial to the vital influence of peers and "community" upon
engendering that relativistic perspective. Because of what she
is concentrating upon here, it is not surprising, then, that
when she writes, "If Perry's research helps us understand our
students and their writing, then it should also help us to teach
them more effectively" (57), her greatest advice to teachers who
would also use Perry's scheme in their writing classes concerns
that question of "community" – "context and relationships,"
using her terms. Upon this front, she writes that, "Because
Perry's scheme deals specifically with the recognition of
alternatives and differences, it is essential for students to
listen to peers as they express and justify differences of
opinion" (58). She explains the "essential" nature of the
writing classroom as "community" further:

> [T]he centrality of community to the value system
> that supports Perry's scheme strongly argues for the
> importance of students learning from each other's
> differences. The pain and risk of abandoning earlier
> worldviews is too great to take on without help;
> according to Perry, that help must come from the
> group that first caused the student to question her
> attitudes. […] [H]omongenous classes ignore the
> social framework of the Perry scheme, at the same
> time they severely limit the use of important and
> effective writing strategies. (58)

And again, the role of the writing teacher within this
"community" of would-be "critical thinkers" and "critical

writers" is extremely significant. As it was for those other

researchers and theorists I have discussed before, it is

imperative for Capossela that writing teachers who would put

Perry's intellectual scheme to use not stand ahead of or apart

from their students but *with* them. As Capossela contends, "The

teacher's most important role in fostering […] development is

not to accelerate it or 'get it' to happen, but to offer kinship

in the difficult enterprise it represents" (59). For her, a

"crucial form of support" for students in a course that would

pursue such "critical writing" as Capossela does is "for

teachers to practice what Perry calls 'a certain openness – a

visibility in their own thinking, groping, doubts, and styles of

communication' […]" (60). A writing instructor who would teach

according to Perry's scheme and the theories of "relativistic

pragmatism" therein must not simply be within that peer

"community" but, perhaps even more critically, stand with those

student writers amidst that "uncertainty and lack of closure,"

exhibiting the "pain and risk" of doing so. As Capossela wrote,

such a writing instructor must foster a real "kinship" with

students who are experiencing that "disequilibrium" – writing

and thinking, and living from out of it.

Regardless of whether their work is rooted in the theories

of John Dewey or William Perry and regardless of whether it is

rooted in empirical research or theoretical observation, these

different composition scholars and their respective essays all hammer home the very same point and the time and attention I have paid to them has meant to drive it further: for writing instructors who would witness the fostering and flourishing in their students of William Perry's "relativistic pragmatism" and John Dewey's "reflective thinking" and, through them, that unendingly surging and churning dialectic of Certainty and Uncertainty I have been seeking to explain and understand further myself since the very first chapter, not simply necessary but utterly vital is that community of peers who are writing and rewriting together, for and to each other, and, through it all, experiencing that scary uncertainty that "reflective thinking" and "relativistic pragmatism" perpetuate, very well for the very first time. And amidst all of this, there *has* to be a teacher who is among them, very well one of them. Dewey and Perry's theories of education and intellectual evolution had testified to it and those compositionists, through their research, corroborated it.

Before I had begun to examine those essays, I had put forward the question why I had not witnessed my students in those freshman writing courses at the University of Delaware throughout the Fall 2007 and Spring 2008 semesters experiencing that same "relativistic pragmatism" or "reflective thinking" that Capossela and Fishman and all the others claimed theirs

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had? Again, what exactly *was* the problem? It is very simple.

My writing class was not that sort of community and I was not

that sort of writing teacher. Again, I feel that the

philosophies – those of Dewey and Perry and Elbow - that had so

defined my own teaching philosophy and practices were sound.

Furthermore, I feel that my course plan – my readings and films,

my discussion plans, my essay assignments, and even my feedback

to students upon their many drafts – was sound as well, any

logistical bugs aside. But there were things about how I

related to those students in my class and how I allowed them to

relate to each other – or fail to relate to each other – that,

in the end, served to derail those greatest efforts. I did not

realize it at the time, but if I do take, again, that long, hard

look in the mirror, I see it now. Very clearly.

Two chapters ago, I had "confessed" that I loved Certainty.

It was, and is, indeed a truth. I love to be organized and

prepared and I hate disorder around me. When I face unfamiliar

or uncertain situations, I withdraw. Perhaps related to all of

this, I am very shy and subdued around those whom I do not yet

know. This is something that teaching really and truly had

helped me with because it pushed me, trained me, to stand before

veritable strangers and talk and ask questions and fish for

responses. But this said, I believe that, while I did indeed,

in time, come to welcome Uncertainty – as a writer but simply as

a human being living in this world – I *never* did as a teacher, at least not fully.

Although I did grow *used* to teaching those "strangers" who were my freshman writing students semester after semester, I don't know if I ever became *comfortable* with it – with the Uncertainty that a new semester's course full of those "strangers" represented to me. Because of this, I believe that, over the years since I first began to teach all those years ago now, I adopted habits that I felt, unconsciously, would shield me, save me, from that Uncertainty. From the disdain. From the languor. From the apathy, worst of all. I no longer had the students push their desks into a semi-circle so they could see each other when they spoke during discussions but, instead, allowed them to stay in the rows they had found those desks in. I stood behind a lectern or podium or even a table rather than sitting among the students. My class notes were carefully planned and outlined very neatly upon a yellow legal pad, my questions and when to ask them noted very prominently so I would have no problem seeing them from where I stood. When I came to the class days scheduled for "peer review," I would separate the students into groups of my own already-determined choosing and then hand out their "Peer Review Questions," but, thereafter, what happened was up them. I told them that it was their responsibility to get the responses and feedback that they

thought their essays needed and that, when their group had gone

through all of their drafts, they could leave. It was

infrequent that most of the students stayed for more than half

of the class hour. Until the last peer group was finished, I

sat at the front of the class – apart from them. Again, if I

were to take that long, hard look in the mirror, I believe that

is what I would see. Me apart from them. Them apart from each

other. Like I said before, these - and I have no doubt others -

were all habits that I had adopted, whether consciously or

unconsciously, because some part of me felt that they would

"shield" me or "save" me from that Uncertainty of the classroom

through allowing me some small sense of control and, very well,

authority. But while they may have made me feel a little more

comfortable before those writing students in my class, in the

end, they all only served to thwart those goals, that

"potential" and "promise," of my particular teaching philosophy.

Simply put, while I may have talked the talk, so to speak, about

Uncertainty and questioning and the unknown, I did not walk the

walk.

    I do not want to sound overly dramatic. My writing class,

whether at the University of Delaware or elsewhere, was not some

stoic, isolating re-education camp. Yes, the class had

discussions and the students wrote essays that I do believe,

despite what I have said, often – very often – roused in them

that "perplexity" and "disequilibrium." But through it all, the flow of those perspectives of "truth" and reality was, with little exception, between those students and me. When they wrote, they wrote to me and for me, regardless of whether they knew their peers would be reading their drafts or not. When they talked in class, they were talking to me, even if they were responding to something their classmates had said. They didn't ask each other questions and they definitely did not ask me questions, unless it was to clarify an assignment or a due date.

As I said before, there was no "community" in my writing class. If there was a "community," it was a minimal thing. And if there was a "community," I wasn't "inside" it. "Deep within" it. Because there was no "community," there were no "cooperative processes" or "joint activities" and, thus, no "discursive riptides" or "contentious counterstatements." Because of that, there was no "explor[ing] and utiliz[ing] [of] their idiosyncrasies" or "express[ing] and justify[ing] [of] differences of opinion" and, thus, no "question[ing] [of] their assumptions about the nature and location of knowledge and values." And because of that, then, there was no "collaborative reconstruction" or "reshaping" or "imaginative recombinations" or "rethinking." No "reflective thinking and no "relativistic pragmatism." And as for me as a teacher of writing, I know I did not "alternate roles" with my students so that we could

"develop common understanding." And I know I did not exhibit "a certain openness – a visibility in [my] thinking, groping, doubts, and styles of communication." And what were we left with in the end? As I wrote before … The same old thing all over again.

But before I ride this train of my teaching's past wholly off its rails, let me stop for a moment to look at those experiences from my freshman writing classes at the University of Delaware from a very different perspective. While I had used the theories and research of Perry-focused compositionists like Dinitz and Kiedaisch and Capossela to criticize them, I could also use those theories and research to *defend* them and, thus, to all but utterly relieve me of responsibility for what did or did not happen in those classes, because they do indeed offer me an "out." A very *easy* "out." In their 1990 essay for the *Journal of Teaching Writing*, Dinitz and Kiedaisch had claimed, again, that, "Perry's work suggests that many eighteen-year-olds are struggling to maintain their dualistic world view and so may not be open to an assignment which requires them to take multiple points of view" (217). Their observational evidence read through this theory, they then conclude, "Rather than blaming our students for not working hard or questioning the quality of our teaching, we now attribute some of their problems to their present state of cognitive or ethical intellectual

development" (219). If *my* experiences during that year of

teaching of freshman writing at the University of Delaware were

read through such a conclusion, I could step away from that look

in the mirror and reason that there was no "collaborative

reconstruction" or "reshaping" or "imaginative recombinations"

or "rethinking" - no "reflective thinking and no "relativistic

pragmatism" – simply because I was trying to use my particular

teaching philosophy and the practices I had put together to do

so with students who simply were not cognitively or

intellectually "mature" enough for the nature of discourse and

questioning – the nature of the writing – that I had expected of

them. Simply put, I was trying to teach towards "reflective

thinking" and "relativistic pragmatism" with eighteen-year-old

freshman writers and, although I was naïve enough to believe

that the case would be otherwise, it simply was not going to

happen because they *were* eighteen-year-old freshman writers. If

the engendering of perspectives that allowed for idiosyncrasies,

contraries, and uncertainties was ever going to happen with them

and for them, it was going to happen when those students were,

again, cognitively or intellectually "mature" enough for it to

happen. When they were ready. *Then and only then*. Yes, I

could try - and did try, even if it was on an "individual" front

rather than a "community" - to intervene and confront them with

assignments and readings and discussions that were intended to

beget that seminal "perplexity" and "disequilibrium" in those writing students in my classes, but, if I were to follow the explanations of Dinitz and Kiedaisch, there was simply only so much I could actually do. I was, again, either too naïve or too idealistic to think otherwise.

John Dewey himself had offered a similar conclusion, as I discussed in my fourth chapter. In *How We Think*, Dewey had written, again, that "Since learning is something that the pupil has to do himself and for himself, the initiative lies with the learner"(36) and that, because of this, "The teacher is a guide and director; he steers the boat, but the energy that propels it must come from those who are learning" (36). Despite those confessions about my self-sabotage, as it were, at fostering a "community" in the classroom and standing "inside" of that "community," had I not tried my very hardest to be a "guide and director" for those students? To "steer" that "boat" that was the course and its content? Those freshman students in my writing classes that year were indeed, for the most part, the very definition of the sorts of students Dinitz and Kiedaisch had described. Many of them were eighteen years old or there about. Many of them were away from home for the first time in their lives. Many of them were from less metropolitan or cosmopolitan parts of Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, or New Jersey and, consequently, had been exposed to little that could

be seen as "diverse" or "different." Many of them did not know anything but that isolated and insular "world" of their hometown – and did not *want* to know anything other than it, at least when it came to perspectives of "truth" or reality. I wanted those students to think and write *beyond* their "dualistic" standing and those students were simply not cognitively or intellectually "mature" enough to do so. Was it any surprise, then, that things went as they did for me that year?

Beyond this, even if they *were* "mature" enough to realize that "reflective thinking" or "relativistic pragmatism," there were other issues at hand that worked to hinder my teaching philosophy's purpose for the course. The greatest of these was student apathy. The class was a course required of all freshman students. Very few of them wanted to be there and would be there if they didn't have to be. Furthermore, very few of them confessed to enjoying to "write," let alone considering themselves "writers." The class and writing as a whole was something they *needed* to do in order to get where, and get what, they wanted. Neither served any other purpose for them. Was this low estimation of "writing" – in particular, the species of "writing" that I would have them do, "writing" that welcomed and thrived upon Uncertainty – but an example of an appraisal of a greater scale, held by the university or by American society as a whole? According to William Covino, the answer is yes.

Towards the end of *The Art of Wondering*, Covino explains the

essential difficulty of trying to promote Uncertainty and

"wonder" amidst a culture that simply *does not*:

> Although pluralism and disdain for positivism are
> fermenting critical theory, institutionalized
> communicative efficiency prevails outside the pages
> of postmodernism, where the appointment book is the
> primary text, individual achievement and happiness
> are all, progress is linear, and the universe exists
> in binary permutations of a silicon chip. It is, or
> it isn't. (128)

While Covino glorifies "thoughtful uncertainty, the attitude

that necessarily informs full exploration and motivates wonder"

(131), he acknowledges the unfortunate reality that this

aspiration is, all too unfortunately, debased in this sort of

culture, wherein the standard of writing wanted of students

would leave them with "a trained incapacity to speculate or

raise questions" (129).

When I recall those students in my writing classes at the

University of Delaware, while I would not describe them along

the lines of Covino's bleak portrait, the urge to satisfy that

same "bottom line" that he diagnosed was pronounced and

overwhelming. It was not as severe as it was at Widener in

Pennsylvania, where there wasn't even an English Department, let

alone a Writing Program, but, in their stead, a "Humanities

Division," with all the prominence and pull at the university as

a first aid station at the shopping mall. Despite this, it was

still there, even if not so much an influence from within as

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from without, and, because of it, writing was seen as a means to an end rather than an end unto itself. Taken as a whole then – the possibilities for trying to implement that translation of my teaching philosophy with writing students who were not cognitively or intellectually "mature" enough for or simply prejudiced against because of cultural or social depreciation of the relativistic, uncertainty-stirring thinking and writing that it called for them to do – is it any surprise, really, that things went as they did that year?

But all of this said, no matter how valid these explanations may be, no matter how present they were in and for those writing students at the University of Delaware, I do not concede to them because they don't sit well with me. To me, they feel like *excuses*. Copouts. While I do not doubt that they *were* influences upon how those students responded to my freshman writing course – the curriculum and how I taught it - and, thus, how they thought and wrote throughout their respective semesters, I could not claim that they were *the* influences upon them.

After all these many pages since beginning this chapter, however, I could also no longer claim that the "blame," if that is what you would call it, rests solely upon *my* shoulders. Because of that tendency towards Certainty, from time to time and in particular when that urge for Control fails me, I suffer

from over-reflection, obsessing upon all of those "What if … ?"-s and upon what I could have done differently when, in the end, there is a good portion of the phenomena of teaching that is, simply, out of my control. Like it or not, that is simply how it is. In reality, then, it was *all* of those possibilities I had been discussing thus far at work in my writing classes: all of them influencing the others, determining the others, in unseen ways. *Dialectically*. In the end, if I am guilty of anything, it is of underestimating and overestimating those writing students at the very same time. Because I had underestimated the intellectual and cultural "baggage" that they brought with them to my classroom, I had overestimated their natural capacity to think and to write as I wanted them to, from the very start of the semester. Because of this, I did not supply those writing students with the sort of "community"-fostering support that they would seem to have needed and, instead, left them too often to their own devices, nurturing them separately as "individuals" rather than all of them as a "community" of writers. Because of my passion and my faith in, again, the "potential" and "promise" of that dialectic between Certainty and Uncertainty – of that old commandmant to "write with Uncertainty" – I also overestimated the sheer possibility of them engendering that "reflective thinking" and "relativistic pragmatism" in the relatively short duration of time that is a

twelve- to fourteen-week college semester. These theories of

Dewey and Perry were meant to represent educational as well as

intellectual ends that *had no end* – as Capossela wrote, again,

"by definition open-ended." Continuously growing and changing,

like that gnostic sunwheel. But I wanted it to happen between

August and December, February and May. Truth be told, it was

almost as if I *needed* it to happen in that time, during my

class, to *prove* my teaching philosophy. To prove myself – to

myself. And because of that, it was an all or nothing situation

I had established for myself. Ironically enough … Black or

white. If it wasn't going to happen in my class, it wasn't

going to happen at all, or so I believed. If I took one last

long, hard look in the mirror, I realize now that I believed

wrong. Those freshman writing students will have only just

graduated by the time I sit and write this. How many of them

will be leaving UD with that "reflective thinking" and

"relativistic pragmatism," the seeds planted in my writing

class? I cannot say with any certainty, but I do hope that some

of them will.

What I have tried to articulate with this current

undertaking is that a dialectic between Certainty and

Uncertainty is utterly necessary to those would write and teach

– and simply think and live as fellow inhabitants of human

civilization. It is a necessity because a privileging of either

extreme, a movement towards the one at the expense of the other, is antithetical to any yearning for a progressive society and culture. Whether it is the pursuit of Certainty that culminated between the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the birth of what became known as "Current-Traditional Rhetoric" or the pursuit of Uncertainty that defined the some of the theories of "post-modern" literary critics and composition scholars in the late twentieth century - which, in some ways, would eventually bring me to this endeavor in a very personal way – *neither* is helpful to those who would work towards that progress because they both help nothing but the profusion of the status quo. Again, the same old thing all over again. However, this dialectic is a necessity that is, unfortunately, none too easy to realize, as my experiences teaching freshman writing at the University of Delaware exhibited.

The difficulty arises from the fact that you have to always remain conscious of that dialectic. You always have to be aware of how it is working. Because it would seem that, unconsciously, humans have an almost "natural" tendency towards Certainty, as John Dewey had explained in *The Quest for Certainty*, that dialectic has to be deliberately and willfully manipulated. To me, that dialectic is almost like a marriage: once you allow yourself to believe that it can flourish on its own and leave it to proceed forth as it pleases, you've taken it

for granted. And once you have taken it for granted, you

already have a problem on your hands. For me, it has been the

most difficult thing I have tried to do with teaching:

realizing that dialectic. I had thought that if I had a

readings and assignments and a rubric that *fit* those

philosophies of Dewey and Perry and Elbow, the dialectic would

follow, almost naturally. I was wrong. I couldn't hide behind

a lectern or a desk and, like that dialectic itself, leave those

writing students in my classes to their own devices,

corresponding with them and, therein, confronting their

perspectives of reality and "truth," only through my feedback to

their drafts or during class discussions. Again, there had to

be more from me in order to keep that necessary dialectic

working as it needed to work. And because of that difficulty,

if I took one last long, hard look in that mirror, at least as

concerns this work, I do not know whether I would continue to

teach freshman writing *because* of that difficulty. Teaching

freshman writing is hard work in and of itself to begin with,

but, when you bring into that situation the purpose of fostering

that dialectic, the job simply becomes that much harder because

you have to open yourself to those students that much more.

I do believe that this present work has a few things to

offer the conversation of the field of composition and rhetoric.

First and most apparent, there are the conclusions offered about

the lure and inevitable quandary of worshipping either Certainty
or Uncertainty in the absence of the other. There are also
those related to fostering that dialectic between Certainty and
Uncertainty and the difficulties therein. Of them, these many
pages have already offered a thorough summary. With those
particular issues, as a whole, there is the crucial necessity of
remaining always conscious of whether your writing or your
teaching is doing what you had intended them to do and, if they
don't, why. Furthermore, at the very same time is also the need
to remain as fluid and flexible as that dialectic to whatever
experiences writing and teaching brings you. If you become
static in your practice, your philosophy, or simply your
perception of your students or your very own standing as a
teacher, you will begin to take it all for granted. The whole
process, writing and teaching both, will lack life and you will
lose out on untold fruitful possibilities for learning and
growth.

   A second conclusion overlaps somewhat upon the territory
of the issue of dealing with the obstructions that can hinder
establishing that dialectic in a real teaching situation.
Perhaps with possibilities for greater application, the
personality that you as a teacher, whether a teacher of writing
or otherwise, brings with you to an actual classroom with actual
students can profoundly affect the social dynamic of the

learning community therein. Because of this, in the end, it can also affect whatever philosophical intentions you may have originally had for the course and the students in it. This may indeed be a very difficult thing to contend with because, while you as an instructor may be very aware of almost every aspect of your course, how you relate or simply seem to your students may very well not be one of them. Simply put, self-reflectivity *about* the self is not easy. This said, however, it is something crucial you need to work towards nonetheless.

A third conclusion, more implicit throughout this work than it is explicit, betrays my fascination with the various historical taxonomies brought to the field of composition and rhetoric throughout the years. They are very interesting to read, in particular in terms of the differences among the inventive nomenclature for the representative epistemological schools as well as the differences of chronological borders separating them. But I also believe they are potentially very useful. However, that said, they are only as useful as the dynamic nature of their author's portraiture. By this I mean, all too often, the authors of these taxonomies would seem to want to crystallize the history of those schools of rhetoric, like some prehistoric fly swallowed in amber. Furthermore, they would also seem to want to compartmentalize and to standardize the variations and peculiarities and vagaries of the

philosophies that comprise those schools. In doing so, some of these authors and their taxonomies simplify epistemologies and the differences between them that are really anything but "simple," thus restraining them and possessing them in Certainty. And as these taxonomies, very often, are assembled in order to proclaim one particular school – not surprisingly, the school to which the author has sworn allegiance, very often – as the most valid, real or "true," of all those possibilities, it is a situation very similar to Jasper Neel's description of Derrida's self-styled control of Plato. But if knowledge, if reality and "truth," are born out of diversity, ambiguity, and change, shouldn't those taxonomies too be witnessed as always open to revision rather than concrete facts? For taxonomies to be really of a profound use to compositionists, such as myself, who do not see their philosophies of teaching or writing represented so very clear cut amidst those thusly delimited schools, they need to offer, like Lester Faigley had claimed, more synthesis than separation. Taxonomies should be informative roadmaps, not definitive bibles. Perhaps, in the end, it is up to the reader rather than the author to announce this difference.

A final word. It is an unfortunate thing that my basic contention at the heart of these many pages now passed – the limiting and debilitating nature of extremely polarized "black

or white" perceptions of reality and "truth" and the concomitant need for a dialectical relationship between that which is Certain and that which is Uncertain – remains, unfortunately, still pertinent and still pressing. In his introduction to a collection of essays attending to Chinese rhetoric in the March 2010 issue of *College English*, LuMing Mao declared that the Eastern tradition had to be studied by way of "the dialectical process of moving between the external and the internal, between the familiar and the unfamiliar" (332), thereby appreciating "the relationship between the external and the internal as coterminous and interconnected rather than binary and hierarchical." For him, Chinese rhetoric has all-too commonly been understood - or misunderstood – through a very polarizing comparison to Western rhetoric, which "privileges formal, unchanging, and substantial understandings of the way things are, and […] rejects any immediacies of experience and imagination due to their failure to secure a single, objective truth" (331). One of the conclusions that Mao offers at the end of his introduction is that, very simply, "[I]t seems that the tendency to appeal to binary characterizations shows little sign of abating" (345). While he is writing out of a very particular concern about a common representation of Chinese rhetoric, because this arises because of the ideology of Western rhetoric, it is a conclusion about the current state of the whole of

rhetoric in America, where "binary characterizations continue to loom large."

   This is an unfortunately very similar estimation to that put forward by Peter Elbow but two years earlier in the very same journal. In his essay "Voice in Writing Again: Embracing Contraries," Elbow brings his already examined philosophy to the titular issue of "voice." To Elbow, the debate about voice among those in the field of composition and rhetoric is stuck in a theoretical "stalemate," a "slumbering contradiction," because it has been reduced to "an adversarial zero-sum model where one side must be wrong for the other to be right" (172), the all-too common response to a confrontation with contradiction. Furthermore, it would seem that Elbow himself, his place and purpose in the field, has also been tainted by such an "either/or, zero-sum" perspective – and coincidentally in terms of not only this question of "voice" but, through it, those historical taxonomies that would divvy the conversation of the field, both past and present, into so many simple parcels of theoretical property. Of this he explains:

> Because I have been so often cited as representing a
> whole "school" in composition studies, I think that
> this kind of misreading got ingrained and that it has
> affected how many people understand the landscape of
> composition studies – tending to see it as a site for
> either/or, zero-sum conflict between positions. (173)

After exploring how to bring his doctrine of "embracing contraries" to that question of "voice" and, in doing so, trying

to renovate his portrait, Elbow offers a conclusion that is, again, not unlike Mao's. And like Mao's, its meaning extends beyond the particulars of his essay. He declares:

> I have another wider meta-goal for this essay. I'm asking us to learn to be wiser in our scholarly thinking and writing. […][W]e can learn to step outside of either/or thinking (usually adversarial) and work out a both/and approach that embraces contraries. Such thinking can often release us from dead-end critical arguments that are framed by the unexamined assumption that if two positions seem incompatible, only one can be valid. (184)

This said, Elbow's *Embracing Contraries* was published in 1987 and it saw him striving against "either/or" – "right or wrong," "good or evil," "us or them" – perspectives that hinder and undermine writing and teaching and thinking. Twenty years later in those pages of *College English*, he was still banging the same old drum. The question must be asked … *Is anyone listening? Will* anyone listen? If they don't, what can be done about it? There would seem to be two choices. Give up and give in, out of frustration and disillusionment and even bitterness. Or keep banging that same drum too.

Postscript

     As I claimed in the Introduction, while this work, on the whole, has had its investigative gaze upon the past, because the complications and confusions of the present cannot really be known without knowing those of the past, it still has relevance to the present conversation of the field and all that is "current" and "new" to be found therein. The discourse invigorating those "current" or "new" issues would be furthered and deepened through an understanding of the field's past. Consequently, I would further claim, now, that the vanguard of composition theory and research should be re-examined in terms of the often-times, whether consciously done or not, forgotten history of the field. Simply put, we as compositionists should know our own history – or histories. All too often, portraits of the past are rendered with Certainty's bold strokes. Because of this, much is lost or ignored. Nuances. Differences. Uncertainties. If the past is not examined on its own terms, all of this becomes painted over and, again, forgotten. The field of composition and rhetoric and its very own past, in particular as depicted by those historical taxonomies of which I wrote before, are no different. All too often, those taxonomies are the only source of knowledge of the past for would-be compositionists. They don't know what John Dewey or Peter

Elbow, for example, have said about writing or teaching or learning but what *someone else* has said about this - unfortunately. In the end, a portrait of a portrait – and perhaps portraits beyond them – degrades those nuances and differences and uncertainties of the original subject matter.

In terms of this past-concentrated work of my very own, though, I believe that it has most relevance to some particular issues now being interrogated and debated throughout the field: Writing Studies as a department; the role of writing centers and the training of writing center tutors; theme- versus rhetoric-based first-year writing courses; writing across the curriculum and writing in the disciplines; online versus traditional classroom instruction; graduate student and teaching assistant education; and, lastly, historiography, in terms of the unheard narratives beneath the "official" histories of both greater American society and culture and the field of composition and rhetoric itself. These would seem to be the most immediate conversations that I could see being furthered and deepened from a rigorous exploration of the past, in particular as I have offered it throughout this work. Although pursuing those relationships and relevancies may be the next chapter for me, with the field's continued fixation upon technology and "multimodality" and the influence of this upon writing and the teaching of writing, I cannot say exactly, now, where the field

of composition and rhetoric is headed and, thus, what space

there will be there for my "past"-shaded curiosities. I suppose

I will have to wait and see.

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