

Just Thinking about Emma Livry: A Meditation on Composition Pedagogy in Motion by Nettie Farris

*Gray goose and gander,
Waft your wings together,
And carry the good king's daughter
Over the one-strand river.*

An assignment that I often use in my intermediate composition class asks students to form a definition of the term *hero* and then argue that a cultural figure (either real or fictional) of their choice is a hero according to their particular definition. This is a dastardly assignment because when students complete it they then write a companion piece in which they argue the opposite position. My students hate me for this. I consider it a lesson in both the plasticity of language and the complexity of human character. Initially, students have a bit of trouble choosing a person to write about. They apparently don't share my passion for biography. One day, a student asked me a completely unexpected question: *whom would you write about?* I hate it when they do that. I wanted to say, *I just make the assignments, I don't write them.* But what I did say was, *I'll have to think about that.*

After pondering this question for some time, I finally came to the conclusion that I would write about a fictional character. I would write about Tess, from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. When we're drafting definitions, I tell students that we often characterize a hero in terms of traits that we may lack, but wish we had. As an invention exercise, I ask them to isolate a single trait, which they may or may not lack, and discuss why this one trait is necessary for their definition of a hero. I, myself, chose Tess because of her ability to just keep going no matter what befalls her. The woman suffers one atrocity after another and manages to reconfigure herself without hesitation and move onward. I find that a useful characteristic. But lately I've been thinking about William Faulkner's Noble Prize Speech:

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

And I've been thinking that I'd rather do more than simply endure atrocities. I mean Tess literally walks across half of England in this novel, yet she doesn't seem to really get anywhere (unless you call ending up at Stonehenge, a sacrificial victim to one's ridiculous society, progress). I was just thinking about Emma Livry, the nineteenth century ballerina whose tulle skirt caught flame in the gaslight. Because of the danger of the gas, dancers at this time were encouraged to fire proof their costumes. Emma Livry chose not to, because the fire proofing stiffened the fabric and dulled its whiteness, thereby destroying the illusion of a weightless supernatural being so important to the Romantic Ballet. I find her tragedy nobler, because she died for her own beliefs, her own values. I can see her now, Little Emma Livry, in her weightless white tulle, lighting up like a phoenix.

And I've been thinking how wonderful it would be to live in full accordance with one's values. Surely it must be like some uncanny alignment of the stars. Is it really possible to do on earth? But one must start somewhere. I'd like to begin with my classroom—analyze it; see if it reflects my own values. As Emerson says:

The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them own the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is the poet. (23)

I often have trouble seeing the landscape. I admit it. It's simply difficult to manage the required tasks of the day, let alone make sure that they mean something.

Three Faces of Eve

My teaching is reflected in and/or influenced by three separate texts: my syllabus, my physical presence in my classroom, and my own writing. I'm puzzled by the fact that these three texts reflect the images of three entirely different faces.

My Syllabus

My syllabus is a hideous beast of a thing. There's absolutely none of me in it. It's purely a bureaucratic document that I turn in to the department. The first person pronoun does not appear once in this document. I refer to myself as "the instructor." Some sections are virtually lifted from the department's composition handbook. Some of it doesn't even make sense, for example, the General Education Written Communication Requirement:

This course fulfills a General Education Written Communication Requirement. It focuses on writing as a process of thinking as well as a mode of expression and communication. Writing will be presented as an integral aspect of thinking and learning and will therefore be a pervasive activity in this class.

Writing will be a pervasive activity in the class because it's a writing class. I've thought about revising this section, so it makes more sense, but none of the other sections sound like me, so why should this one? There's a section on Penalties. The statement on forfeiting my comments on late drafts I've never enforced. But I keep it in there anyway, because I think people should be able to meet deadlines. And one day I might need it. Most of the other penalties involve final portfolios, which I collect on the last

day of class. I think students should have it together by this time. Nevertheless, I obtain an email address with each portfolio, so I can clear up any last minute problems before I turn in my grades. The only thing that remotely reflects me in the front matter of my syllabus (and that's what it is—matter) is my email address, which is simply my first name, followed by the name of my university. I like my email address. It's very informal, just as I am in my class. And it should be easy for students to remember. I've been thinking about revising the entire front matter for years in order to make it more hospitable. If I were a student reading this syllabus on the first day of class, I don't think I would want to stay. However, I don't think it's merely a question of time that actually keeps me from revising it. Eileen E. Schell interviewed contingent women composition faculty and found that,

with part-time women writing instructors, the concept of workplace emotion helped illuminate a split between the instructors' feelings about their classrooms and their feelings about the institutions that employed them. Both the interviewees and the writers of published narratives revealed that while they liked, even loved, to teach, they nearly all had negative feelings about their working conditions and their relation to the institution at large. In the classroom, they felt in control, valued, and alive; in the institution, they often felt invisible and alienated. (84)

The image of me, or the lack thereof, in my syllabus reflects such a split. Though I hate to complain too much about the conditions of part-time university employment, for I have used it to my advantage. There aren't many jobs that allow one to do what she loves while spending so much time at home with her young children. This was a vital choice for me. My mother always worked full time; she had to in order to support our family. It was lonely. I don't remember anyone ever reading to me when I was a child. I wasn't born into academia. I am the fifth child and the first person in my family to attend college—but, I was born into music. My mother has told me that, as a baby, I would sit beneath the piano and nod my head in time with the music while she gave her piano lessons. (My mother taught piano lessons in addition to her full-time employment.) And I've spent countless hours in dance studios, including five of my most formative years with the Louisville Ballet Company. I think this is why I must first hear the rhythm and then the sounds before the words come, at least the good ones—and, I think that if one is not born into academia, then she requires a formal invitation. I think I'm waiting for my invitation to the ball.

My Classroom

My classroom is a different story. I try to be fully present. I think of this as a feminist act. I hope that it encourages my students to bring their full selves as well (both to the classroom and to their own writing), because otherwise, I don't think authentic learning is possible. A student once told me that I'm a very good listener, which surprised me. I'm easily distracted. But she insisted. I'm starting to believe her. I am a good listener. I think this is important, because people like to feel heard. Otherwise, they lean toward muteness, and in a writing class, this is not good. We do a lot of sharing. I got this from Peter Elbow when I taught out of his *Community of Writers* text. Sometimes we share something written, and sometimes we talk about out-of-class work. Absolutely every voice in the class is heard. This too is important. Sometimes people need an invitation to speak. This is a celebratory act. I generally say something positive in response to what each person has said. This I do in gratitude.

My Writing

In my writing I am much more voluptuous than I appear in my physical body. My writing is intimate. Much more intimate than I could safely be in a classroom. My boundaries are much more fluid. But at the same time, the writing serves to contain me. I consider this somewhat of a paradox. As a young child, I had a distant aunt who was blind. Since she could not rely on her sense of sight, she had to depend on her sense of hearing. She would never look at people directly, but would turn her head so she could hear more fully. She frightened me. I consider writing an additional sense, one that's become more highly developed in order to make up for my other senses, which don't seem to be fully integrated with my brain. Sometimes I see myself as a blind woman, trying to write her way through the dark.

Process Pedagogy Toward One More Fully Rhetorical

When I was asked to create my philosophy of teaching for my teaching portfolio a number of years ago, I was at a loss. I had been trying to earn a living by teaching for so many years that I hadn't had time to read about it. I had no teaching philosophy. I just did it. But I had been a student in numerous writing workshops (all creative) and I was a writer myself, so my class was basically structured within a process-oriented framework. In my statement of teaching philosophy I discussed how I centered my class around *revision*. I thought revision was the key to writing well. I still consider it important. However, I've come to put more faith in the process of *invention*; for, how does one revise what's not yet there? As Jim Corder tells us, "invention is a name for a great miracle—the attempt to unwind time, to loosen the capacities of time and space into our speaking" (29). My daily class schedule reflects this two-part focus. A large number of class sessions are devoted to whole-class workshops on student drafts. I began devoting more class sessions to whole-class workshops when I became dissatisfied with small group peer review. At the time, I had been reading Peter Elbow and agreed that a larger number of readers was best. Then I read *Writing the Natural Way*, by Gabriele L. Rico. Rico sees writing as a two-step process: 1) the more right-brained, creative activity associated with invention, and 2) the more left-brained, critical activity associated with revision. This reminded me of Peter Elbow. However, whereas Elbow privileges *freewriting* as an invention technique, Rico privileges *clustering*. There is an important difference between these two techniques. As Rico argues, clustering brings with it an innate sense of order, whereas freewriting most often arrives formless. I began assigning clustering exercises to my classes and using it myself. I have always assigned freewriting, but I've never actually done it. I'm simply unable. I can't write a word without a purpose and audience and a sense of form. Freewriting is linear and arhetorical. Clustering looks more like a sphere.

Last autumn, my introductory writing class read a selection from Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. They led me to see that humans are very different from animals, because we can make choices. I like Charles Darwin. He educated himself as a naturalist, and I seriously doubt that he would have been able to achieve what he did had he been earning his living as a scientist. I hope one day to go to the Galapagos Islands. I want to see one of those amazing tortoises. Do you know that the Galapagos Tortoise is the slowest animal on earth? And they like their routine, for they have etched an indelible path in the landscape between their home and their water. The one thing my mother has always said to me is this: *Remember, you always have choices*. I've never been able to understand what she meant. I've never been able to see that I had

any choices. This is what Rhetoric is: it's about seeing the entire range of possible choices and then making some. It's both an opening and a closing.

Rhetoric as Magic

In "Magic, Literacy, and the *National Enquirer*," William A. Covino argues that rhetoric is a form of magic. He actually conflates the two terms and states that his purpose in this article is to illuminate manipulative rhetoric:

I suggest that we may borrow terms from magic to illuminate rhetoric and, in particular, to understand the workings of coercive discourse. Although my subject is the rhetoric of coercion, addressed in the terms of magic, you should understand that when I use the word *magic* I mean *rhetoric*. I argue here for the synonymy of magic and rhetoric. After sketching that argument, I leave off any mention of rhetoric, with the hope that magic will sound like rhetoric to you as well. (24)

Furthermore, Covino distinguishes between *true magic* and *false magic*, and he grounds this distinction in the work of Kenneth Burke. According to Covino,

while all magic is always coercive because it constitutes reality by decree, true-correct magic [which he later abbreviates as true magic] is practiced as *constitutive inquiry* or the *coercive expansion of the possibilities for action*, while false-incorrect magic [which he later abbreviates as false magic] . . . is practiced as *enforced doctrine* or the *coercive reduction of the possibilities for action*. (27)

I ask my intermediate writing students to argue for both positions in their definition arguments in an attempt to practice true magic. I'd like them to be able to expand their possibilities for action. I'd like them to be able to see the horizon. I began this practice after taking a graduate seminar in the History of Rhetoric with Dr. Mary Rosner and learning that the Sophists insisted that their students learn to argue both for and against their own position. (I gravitate toward paired assignments anyway and think this has something to do with the fact that most pieces of clothing in my wardrobe come in two colors.) I've learned from *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*, by Susan Jarratt, that this practice originated with Protagoras. According to Jarrett, Protagoras "was the first to say that there were two contradictory arguments about everything, an observation expressed by the Greek phrase *dissoi logoi*" (49). Furthermore,

the sophist found it both impossible and unnecessary to determine any single Truth about appearances, more important is negotiating useful courses of action for groups of people given their varying perceptions about the world. (50)

I think this ability to see two contradictory positions in an argument is very important in a postmodern age. I want my students to see that truth is relative to one's frame of reference. How a term is defined or a subtle change in details can turn a thing into its opposite. Most of my students feel uncomfortable with this. They see an ethical problem in arguing that their chosen hero is in fact not a hero. I think they see it as an act of betrayal. I'm glad they feel uncomfortable. I might be worried if they didn't. I want them to understand that language can be used as both a tool for intellectual inquiry and a weapon of manipulation. I hope they will choose to use language in a way that is ethical. I ask my students to address this question of ethics through reflection, for as Jarratt argues,

those composition programs concentrating solely on “techniques” such as process, free-writing, and sentence-combining, and which remain unreflective about the ends to which “good writing” will be put, open themselves to the classical ethical critique of the sophists: that they provide a skill in an unspecified ethical context. To translate this evaluation into the modern university curriculum, these “sophists” would be like those who teach style, advertising, political debate, or business writing—any kind of facility with the dominant discourse—without reflection built into the pedagogy on the ends toward which its students will use the skills they learn. (96)

I hadn’t realized it before but all of my assignments in intermediate writing use narrative as a mode of development even though they are all arguments. This too is a sophistic technique. As Greek society moved from an oral culture to a literate one, from *mythos* to *logos*, it began to use narrative as a form of rhetoric to support a logical point. As Jarratt suggests, “the sophist combines narrative with rhetorical argument to make his case” (52). I’ve found that students write more developed, more fluent, and more interesting arguments when they use narrative as a mode of development. They tend to use their research to support what they have to say as opposed to tagging along after their research. I do emphasize that their narrative must support their points. I insist that they use key words that explicitly link the body of their support to their definition and suggest that they use at least some topic sentences. This helps to make sure that they are actually writing arguments.

Rogerian Rhetoric, Rhetoric as Love

I’ve been teaching intermediate writing as a course in argument for about a decade, though I’m not sure why, because I often agree with Sally Miller Gearhart when she (ironically) argues that “any intent to persuade is an act of violence” (195). Other times I think: What isn’t an argument? Even a sonnet is an argument. Is a love poem an act of violence? I’ve also always been drawn to Rogerian Argument. When I first started assigning Rogerian arguments, I enforced the very rigid structure proposed by Young, Becker, and Pike:

- 1) An introduction to the problem and a demonstration that the opponent’s position is understood.
- 2) A statement of the contexts in which the opponent’s position may be valid.
- 3) A statement of the writer’s position, including the contexts in which it is valid.
- 4) A statement of how the opponent’s position would benefit if he were to adopt elements of the writer’s position. (283)

I eventually decided this was simply too difficult a feat of mental gymnastics for my students to perform. In addition, it seems to me to be rather a manipulative performance and I don’t like its repeated references to one’s opponent. I don’t think Carl Rogers, the psychologist whose work this form of argument is based on, would approve of it. So I began asking my students to write in the spirit of Carl Rogers. I ask them to create their arguments in the shape of a bridge. I actually bring in a bridge. A beautiful wooden toy handcrafted in Germany by a poor starving artisan. It’s the color of honey. And I bring in Big Billy Goat Gruff and the Troll, who begin on opposite sides of the bridge. The Troll walks across the bridge and meets Big Billy Goat Gruff. He spends quite a bit of time there, staying until Big Billy Goat Gruff is convinced that the Troll understands his point of view. Then the Troll walks slowly with Big

Billy Goat across the bridge to where he lives. I tell my students that the Troll is not to eat Big Billy Goat Gruff when they get there. Because that's not nice.

I stress to my students that the most important part of this argument is the beginning, in which they form their common ground with their audience. Carl Rogers was a Master of Communication and that is what this argument is about. According to Rogers, "the stronger our feelings, the more likely it is that there will be no mutual element in the communication. There will be just two ideas, missing each other in psychological space" (qtd. in Young 285). Rogers suggests that this failure at communication results from the failure of seeing the other person's point of view. In order to solve this problem of communication, we must avoid evaluation and "listen with understanding . . . [We must] see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame reference in regard to the thing he is talking about" (qtd. in Young 285).

I've read many feminist critiques of Rogerian Argument and they've always surprised me. For example, Catherine Lamb sees Rogerian Argument as "feminine rather than feminist" (17). Phyllis Lassner suggests that neutral use of language within Rogerian Argument may make the woman writer doubly vulnerable and perhaps take away her voice (226). In contrast, Jim Corder argues that Rogerian Argument does not go far enough. According to Corder, Rodgers' perspective of communication is grounded in a client-therapist relationship in which the therapist "is already intent upon *not* being an adversary" (21). Corder questions what we are to do when

we are advocates of contending narratives (with their accompanying feelings and thoughts), where we are adversaries, each seeming to propose the repudiation or annihilation of what the other lives, values, and is, where we are beyond being adversaries in that strange kind of argument we seldom attend to, where one offers the other a rightness so demanding, a beauty so stunning, a grace so fearful as to call the hearer to forego one identity for a startling new one. (24)

He tells us that the answer to this question is to change the way we conceive argument. Currently, we see argument as "*display* and *presentation*" (26). In contrast, Corder suggests we see argument as "*something to be*. It is what we *are*" (26). Furthermore, "if we are to hope for ourselves and to value all others, we must learn that argument is emergence" (26). Emergence is frightening:

It is a risky revelation of the self, for the arguer is asking for an acknowledgment of his or her identity, is asking for witness from the other. In argument, the arguer must plunge on alone, with no assurance of welcome from the other, with no assurance whatever of unconditional positive regard from the other. In argument, the arguer must, with no assurance, go out, inviting the other to enter a world that the arguer tries to make commodious, inviting the other to emerge as well, but with no assurance of kind or even thoughtful response. (26)

How do we perform this miraculous act? According to Corder, the answer is love: "It can happen if we learn to love before we disagree" (26). Corder makes a final, very large assertion: "I'll still insist that argument—that rhetoric itself—must begin, proceed, and end in love" (28). Do I talk to my students about love? Of course not. They might be frightened.

Fairy Tale as Rhetoric, Fairy Tale as Magic

I've been teaching my students to write through studying fairy tales for almost as long as I've been teaching argument. I simply love them. We study them as a rhetorical form. There's always a teller, an audience, and a story. And in the telling and retelling of tales we become our own heroes. We accomplish seemingly impossible tasks. It's magic. My favorite activity is to have students retell a tale of their choice and then to write a reflection about their rhetorical choices, about changes they've made to the text. We read these aloud in class. I learn much about my students on this evening, about their values and beliefs, which help shape their stories. It's interesting how students' tales combine to form patterns. This year many of them seem to want their audiences to learn lessons. We got a lot of cautionary tales. Before students write their own retellings we study published retellings in class. We focus on "Cinderella," one of the most retold stories in the world. We read aloud French, German, and Native American versions and then respond to them. We talk about their similarities and differences. We talk about which version students are more familiar with, which version they prefer. And we talk about why. We talk about how fairy tales are shaped by the culture in which they're told, and in turn, how their culture is shaped by them.

I also like to talk about endings and about the effect of endings on their audience. I give them a quotation by Bruno Bettelheim that argues that a true fairy tale must have a happy ending and this is how it differs from myth, which ends tragically. I ask my students whether or not they agree. Most of them do. But some of them turn out to be realists. They think children should be exposed to the facts of the world. I, myself, believe in the transformative nature of fairy tales. I believe they have the power to change the world, or how we perceive it. I like to retell fairy tales myself. Sometimes I give myself a happy ending:

Cinderella

Do you believe in *progress*?
 This floor that I sweep
 so obediently
 is worn smooth,
 victim to the nimble straw
 of my broom,
 though, increasingly,
 it grows fearsome and unruly.
 Flat black ashes guard the grate.
 The garden sheds its leaves
 each autumn
 regardless
 of momentous sorrow.
 Soon the moon will rise, too,
 heavy with grief.
 How I would love to believe in *ecstasy*.
 I am wearing brand new shoes.
 And the ballroom
 floats
 before me
 like a golden bowl,
 overflowing with oranges.

Does my classroom reflect my own values. I think it does. I believe in rhetoric, I believe in magic, and I believe in love.

Works Cited

-
- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Random, 1976.
- Corder, Jim W. "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love." *Rhetoric Review* 4 (Sept. 1985): 16-32.
- Covino, William. A. "Magic, Literacy, and the *National Enquirer*." *Contending with Words*. Ed. Patricia Harkin and John Schilb. New York: MLA, 1991.
- Elbow, Peter and Pat Belanoff. *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing*. 3rd. Ed. Burr Ridge: McGraw. 1999.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature." *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Stephen E. Whicher. Boston: Houghton, 1957.
- Faulkner, William. "Banquet Speech." *Nobelprize.org*. Last modified 25 Mar. 2004. Accessed 24 Oct. 2004. <<http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-speech.html>>.
- Rico, Gabriele L. *Writing the Natural Way: Using Right-brain Techniques to Release Your Expressive Powers*. Los Angeles: Houghton, 1983.
- Lamb, Catherine E. "Beyond Argument in Feminist Composition." *CCC* 42 (Feb. 1991): 11-24.
- Lassner, Phyllis. "Feminist Responses to Rogerian Argument." *Rhetoric Review* 8 (Spring 1990).
- Gearhart, Sally Miller. "The Womanization of Rhetoric." *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 2 (1979): 195-201.
- Jarratt, Susan C. *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois U P, 1991.
- Schell, Eileen E. "The Costs of Caring: "Feminism" and Contingent Women Workers in Composition Studies." *Feminism and Composition Studies: In Other Words*. Ed. Susan C. Jarratt and Lynn Worsham. New York: MLA, 1998.
- Young, Richard E., Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike. *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*. New York: Harcourt, 1970.