later, the vocation can feel as fresh and rewarding as it looked on that day long ago when I said, "All right, then, I'll *be* an English teacher, even though it does mean I'll always be poor." On the good days, I always find myself thinking what a coup it was to win *all this* and to be paid for it too.

In the following pages gleaned from forty years of memories and relatively recent journal notes, I can't hope to have captured how the mixture of pain and joy feels. The pains are perhaps understated, though one reader of an earlier draft has claimed that too many of the episodes that I now see as funny seem simply painful to him. In any case, there is an inevitable prettying up, or at least simplifying, inherent in any account of this kind. Like the rest of the book, this record was designed and written mainly in the hours when I was feeling, if not actually "productive," as we say of ourselves, at least constructive enough to resist TV, Ngaio Marsh, the latest *New Yorker* and all other forms of escape or despair, and to "take pen in hand." (The journal entries were mostly typed or dictated immediately following class, in moods ranging from triumph to despair. But often enough I was too tired to record anything until late evening or the following morning.) Just as the speeches I print represent the relatively acceptable final versions, not the stacks of messy revisions produced in hours of confusion and even anguish, so this journal simply wipes out whatever could not be well accommodated to it: the moments when I could not write or teach at all, the experiences too painful for memory to retain, the abominable sentences and paragraphs that did not survive, the descriptions of anger or despair or even triumph that simply "don't work" when read in cold blood. Even the failures that I report here are no doubt to some degree transmuted in the telling; to write about them is, after all, one way to accommodate them. To see past disasters as funny turns them to good account.

I admitted earlier to the hope that some of my younger readers might be tempted to enter teaching by what they find here, and that some others might be tempted to stay in it. Though this motive by no means accounts for the whole book, it now comes into full play. But perhaps I should repeat the warning I gave those graduate students at the end of part 3: of all professions, this is the one about which generalizations are least reliable. What I have found in teaching, you may not find, and the reasons I offer for my failures and (presumed) successes may have little to do with the actual causes. Indeed my own past predictions about whether this or that student would become a good teacher have often proved to be far from the mark. In short, you'll never know whether "the most demanding of all professions" is for you until you have given it a serious try.

OCCASION 13 · *A Teacher's Journal, 1972–1988*

I · The Rhetorical Problem: Whose Successes, Whose Failures?

Interesting modern accounts of the daily life of the teacher are rare. Favorable accounts are even rarer. Though many novelists and poets have earned their keep as teachers, their reports on their experiences are almost always negative, or in any case satirical. I could name a score of novels and plays that show teachers—and their students—as clods, satyrs, slobs, toadies, maniacal sadists and frauds, but I can think of hardly any that portray college teaching and its related scholarship in a form that any serious teacher would recognize, let alone emulate. An occasional work will succeed with a respectful or even sentimental account of *secondary* teaching: *Goodbye, Mr. Chips, To Sir with Love, Up the Down Staircase.* But only a few modern stories or essays have managed to show, as Lionel Trilling does in "Of This Time, Of That Place," or as John Berryman does in "Wash Far Away," how it feels to try to teach literature, composition, or LITCOMP. Most of them follow the lead of Dickens with his Mr. McChoakumchild, his Mr. Squeers, and his Mr. Creakle, in showing the teacher as fool or knave, standing in the way of the child's natural capacity to learn.[1]

When they do try to get beyond such caricature, they usually do best, as Trilling does, with the moments of failure. Is that because failure is always more dramatic, more decisive, more emotionally persuasive than success? Or is it that success is always a bit dubious in any teaching worth doing—teaching that goes beyond imparting information and simple skills? Perhaps it is only that readers spontaneously enjoy accounts of bad teaching and of the miseries of bad teachers—they've all suffered from so many of those tyrants and bumblers, and it's good to see *them* suffer in revenge.

See the introduction to part 4 above for a description of this occasion.

1. Ancient authors are of course another matter entirely. The dialogue of master and pupil was a major literary form during most periods, from Plato through the Renaissance. Socratic dialogues can be described in many different ways, none better than as a demonstration of what it is like to pursue teaching as a vocation. (Since writing the above, I've seen the movie *Educating Rita,* which does provide many moments that might suggest why a grown-up person would think teaching English—and even composition—worth doing. But the film is very careful to cover its "sentimental" tracks with ample ironies against teaching and on behalf of "real life.")

No literary portrayal of a teacher's anguish is more powerful than D. H. Lawrence's portrait of the seventeen-year-old Ursula Brangwen's terrified encounter in *The Rainbow* with a class of hostile, brutalized pupils. Like many another fictional teacher, Ursula succeeds only when she abandons her ideals and learns how to beat her charges into submission.

> But she had paid a great price out of her own soul, to do this. It seemed as if a great flame had gone through her and burnt her sensitive tissue. . . . Oh, and sometimes she felt as if she would go mad. What did it matter, what did it matter if their books were dirty and they did not obey? . . . Oh, why, why had she leagued herself to this evil system where she must brutalize herself to live? Why had she become a school teacher, why, why? (Chapter 13, "The Man's World.")

The failures we teachers meet will vary, of course, depending on where we're placed. I have never had to face the physical threats that many a secondary teacher now faces daily; I have never had to threaten violence, let alone actually use it. I can only guess at the kinds of torture that in other circumstances I might have given or received. But I have known my share of psychic torture and visible failure—enough to help me recognize why it is so easy for authors to portray *only* failures, comic or pathetic.

October 31, 1978

My freshman, Jerry,[2] comes late to his appointment to talk about his paper. His writing has been so poor, his responses in class so sodden, that I have about concluded—against my professed principles—that he is hopelessly short on natural ability. Maybe he's simply one of those rare mistakes made by our admissions office. Maybe he's just what we used to call dumb. Thick. Hollow between the ears. Whatever his native ability, I have to conclude that this sullen, unresponsive creature is *slow*, slow in his reading (he cannot read aloud without stumbling badly), slow in his writing ("It takes me four hours to turn out one page"), slow in responding to my questions here in my office, offering responses that are often off-track, uninformed—dumb.

I resist the obvious conclusion and continue my effort to break into his world. Breaking and entering—that's my business, always on the assumption that some sort of treasure is inside if one can only get by the burglar alarms. An arrogant, sometimes brutal business this is, almost as brutal as Ursula's caning. But if you can't break in, you can never hope to help them break out. So I keep slugging away at it, trying first this move, then that—getting nowhere.

2. I have used the student's real name only when the anecdote reflects unequivocal credit, as it *almost* does here. Jerry's real name was of course Barry.

"Let's look at it this way. Have you never enjoyed . . . ?"

No, he has never enjoyed . . . whatever I name.

"When we were talking about the fat woman in [Flannery O'Connor's] 'Revelation' [*he* is fat], did you . . . ?"

No, he did not.

Finally, in desperation:

"Well, let's stop talking about the course for a while. When you're not being nagged by teachers like me, what do you really like to do?"

He looks even more withdrawn than before—not really hostile, exactly, just passive with a touch of sullenness.

"Isn't there *anything* you really like to spend your time at, anything that grabs you?"

In such moments, one "grabs" for whatever slang one happens to have available—always at least ten years behind whatever the student would recognize as the way his kind of person talks.

A pause. Then:

"I like to watch football on TV."

"Well, then." Hearty, now. My opening! The prospector has found his lode. "How would you feel about writing your next paper about—ah—whatever it is that—ah—grabs you about the—ah—current football scene . . . ?"

I am cursing myself for not even knowing which teams are which. . . .

"No, I don't think I could do that."

The hour ends. I am exhausted. He leaves without thanking me for my unsuccessful try.

I learned, a year later, that he had survived, after a disastrous quarter or so. As a sophomore he did better-than-average work. In his fourth year, I met him on campus, a better-than-surviving Economics major, and he told me that it was only when he got into my *colleague's* humanities course that things began to make sense. *Somebody* got to him, but not me!

The percentages of such failures will vary from teacher to teacher, from year to year, from decade to decade, even from class to class in the same term. But there are always some failures.

You can fail with the bright as well as with the slow. At Chicago we get our share of students who think they are educated already.

November 7, 1979

Lisa, who is sure to get on the dean's list, because she can turn out slick work on any assigned topic (a "prize high-school debater," she lets us know at every turn), comes to me at mid-term:

"Why do I have to waste my time listening to those assholes bull-

shitting when my father is paying good money for my education here? I want to hear what *you* have to say."

No, I did not make that up. Nor did I surrender to my impulse to slap her. So far as I can tell, Lisa learned nothing from me or from anyone else during four "successful" years—nothing other than how to win debating points.

Why is it, I ask again, that we generally find it easier to write and read accounts of such teaching miseries than accounts of the times when the true vein is struck and the student starts digging? Is it no more than original sin—our natural interest in failure, disaster, shame? After all, teaching is not the only life that gets a poor press in fiction and drama: troubles outnumber triumphs on every page and stage. Our very language is weighted toward failure: there are far more words in my thesaurus for loss, grief, evil, suffering, vice, and failure than for happiness, virtue, and success. Is it just that all happy teaching experiences are alike—while each miserable moment is miserable in its own way—and therefore more interesting?

February 14, 1982

My friend Anne, who teaches in the adult division of a neighboring university, writes me this week about her class of fifteen part-timers; all of them carry full-time jobs and attend classes only in the evenings or on Saturdays.

"I finally decided to ask the author of our textbook, who teaches nearby, if he would visit our class. He did, and it was wonderful from beginning to end. My students' image of an author of a book led them to expect a stiff, formal hour, and it was great to see how pleased they were when he turned out to show interest in what *they* thought and felt. Cherice was especially turned on. She had been looking forward to his coming for weeks, and she came to class all dressed up—usually she wears jeans. She started off the semester with an attitude of 'Oh, God, what's this stuff!', because everything about his book's cover and its opening pages suggested an intellectual world not just foreign to her but hostile to her kind. That took four or five weeks to change, and for the past month and a half or so she's been telling me that she walks around having conversations with the author in her head. And before this she's never even been aware that she *had* an intellect, much less valued it. . . . The whole class has been going marvelously ever since."

Most teachers chose the field they're in because some teacher, early or late, led them to some experience like Cherice's. You might expect, then, that we'd have a flood of literature about those experiences: novels of con-

version, short stories about seeing the light, testimonials in our professional journals about "how Professor Smith turned me from slob to scholar," about Professor Rybine's gratitude for his chosen profession. But we do not.[3] We have grown so used to poor-mouthing what we do, so bludgeoned into thinking that the way to talk about teaching is to satirize it, that we seem to have lost the very vocabulary of celebration. Is it because talk about success and gratitude too often, like the following, lacks dramatic specificity, literary vitality?

February 6, 1987

Both classes seem to be going wonderfully. Cannot remember ever enjoying classes more. A wonderful bunch of freshmen, struggling courageously with Aeschylus, then Thucydides, then Sophocles. Then it will be back to Thucydides again, and Euripides. They are so gloriously eager, most of them, that I come away from class feeling blessed (unlike last quarter) for having been able to talk with them for an hour. And my graduate class, Introduction to Literary Criticism—those 25 kids are a delight. In previous years I've always found, when the first papers come in, a radical decline from the level of class discussion; these two classes seem to write almost as well as they talk. How do I put this together with all the public lament about a national decline? And how can one express, without sounding impossibly square to this generation of institution-rejectors, one's simple sense of gratitude for the institutions that turn up these many responsive souls year by year, the high schools and college admissions procedures that turn them over to me for my "use"? Left to "my own devices," how could I ever locate such wonderful colleagues?

We just don't seem to talk very well about successes and thanksgiving, we who are properly contemptuous of the many phony optimisms touted by our political and commercial leaders. We do produce many articles, in journals like *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *The English Journal*, reporting enthusiastically *to one another* about how this or that new teaching method has worked for us. But when we address "the public," portraying the profession in general, we tend to foul

3. See however the collection of testimonials in *A Celebration of Teachers*, National Council of Teachers of English (Urbana, Ill., 1985), and the essays collected by Peter Beidler in *Distinguished Teachers on Effective Teaching*, New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 28 (San Francisco, 1986). See also the fine recent book that I wish I had known before writing the bulk of this one: Philip Jackson's *The Practice of Teaching* (New York, 1986). Like the witnesses assembled by Beidler, Jackson's essays treat "teaching respectfully, which is to say that they treat it as being important, as an activity to be taken seriously, not only by its practitioners but by the world at large" (p. xi).

our nest, like Philip Roth, one-time English teacher, in *Letting Go* (1962), or Simon Gray, in *Butley* (1971), one of the most popular productions ever by our campus theater (it was produced twice within a decade). The witty center of that play is a middle-aged, failed English teacher, Butley, contemptuous of his profession and of his fellow teachers. In contrast, the "good teachers," those who have not failed colorfully, those who do not insult and cheat their students, are imperceptive, unoriginal, stodgy, prissy, dull—fitted only to serve as comic butts. We who attended the play all loved it. What fun to hear that cruel, clever slob turn on his students and move them to tears with his sarcasm.

As Butley's student reads her abominable paper he tears her to shreds:

MISS HEASMAN: . . . "and thus of forgiveness on the theological as well as the human level."
BEN: Level?
MISS HEASMAN: Yes.
BEN: The human *level?* . . .
MISS HEASMAN: . . . "Paradoxically, *A Winter's Tale* of a frozen soul—"
BEN: Bit fish-mongery, that.
MISS HEASMAN: (*laughs mirthlessly*) "—is therefore thematically and symbolically about revitalization."
BEN: Sorry. Re-whatalization?
MISS HEASMAN: Re-*vi*talization.
BEN: (*gets up and goes to* MISS HEASMAN) Thematically and symbolically so, eh?
MISS HEASMAN: . . . "As we reach the play's climax we feel our own—spiritual—sap rising."
BEN: (*after a long pause*) Sap?
MISS HEASMAN: Sap.
BEN: Sap. Sap. Yes, I think sap's a better word than some others that spring rhymingly to mind. Good. Well, thank you very much. What do you want to do—I mean, after your exams? . . .
MISS HEASMAN: Teach.
BEN: English?
MISS HEASMAN: Yes. . .
BEN: Teacher of whom?
MISS HEASMAN: Sixth forms, I hope.
BEN: Isn't it more exhilarating to get them earlier? Sixth-form teachers are something like firemen called in to quench flames that are already out. Although you can never tell—recently I've enjoyed reading almost as much as I did when I was twelve. I do hope I didn't slip through their net—it makes one lose confidence. But I'm sure *you'll* be all right. Perhaps books are just my *madeleines*, eh? . . . I'm not really myself this afternoon, what do you want to do next week?
MISS HEASMAN: We have to cover at least six Shakespeares.

BEN: From what I've heard already, Shakespeare's as good as covered. . . .
MISS HEASMAN: Believe it or not, you can be as rude as you like. I don't take it personally.
BEN: That's another good way of taking the fun out of teaching. Good afternoon, Miss Heasman. . . .

BEN stands at the open door, gestures obscenely after her. Then, aware that he is holding her essay, pinches his nostrils, holds the essay at a distance, makes gagging sounds, pantomines gas-poisoning as he goes back to his desk. MISS HEASMAN has come back to the door, stands watching him. BEN drops the essay onto his desk, stiffens, turns slowly. He and MISS HEASMAN stare at each other. MISS HEASMAN turns and goes quickly from the room.

Butley later throws the stack of students' papers on the floor and stomps on them. My friend David Bevington, a fine teacher, said he found the scene excruciating: he wanted to get down on stage and rescue those papers. Me too. But the audience—me too—were laughing and rejoicing: what fun to shit upon our profession. That's the sort of thing we all enjoy as a portrayal of our lives in teaching. But of course for most of us the portrait is a gross exaggeration of the worst we could imagine about our roles. All of us who survive in the profession for as much as ten years enjoy and suffer a far more complex mixture of successes and failures, a day-by-day kaleidoscope that no brief portrait could capture.[4]

If we put the hours spent being a scholar to one side awhile, just what is that life?

—It is a life lived in the face of towering obstacles to success, some of which I turn to in the next section.

—It is a life that constantly threatens the ego, because no teacher knows enough, either about the subject or about students' needs, to do what needs doing.

January 2, 1972

On my way to my first class of the quarter, I meet Philip Kurland in the corridor. Both of us are carrying an armful of books and notes.

"I know what you're thinking, Phil, carrying all those heavy law books to your first class. You're thinking that this is the time they are going to find out just how much of a fraud you are."

"Yes," he laughs, "and I know how *you* know!"

4. Nobody knows just what proportion of those who start stay the course—or perhaps I should say "the courses"—from first teaching assignment to retirement. My guess is that far more than half—lower than one would find in better-paid professions like medicine, higher than in less personally rewarding, non-tenured professions like journalism.

Every teacher I've talked with about teaching has had a collection of remembered disasters, humiliations, moments when a genuine weakness was revealed. I shall of course treat my own moments of that kind tenderly. But here's a sample:

Sometime in October 1950, a memory from the first year at Haverford, of a three-man tutorial of students in my freshman course. The three are supposed to be doing constructive criticism on their papers for the week:

MARCHAND: [Oh, yes, I remember his name, though I can remember the names of only one or two others from the class of twenty] Mr. Booth, I wonder if I could be excused to go and take a nap? I have a "jitter-session" [oral examination] in an important history class later this afternoon. . . .

WB: Well, ah . . . I don't know, Mr. Marchand. Uh, you know, if you'll stay I'll try to make things a little more interesting. . . .

Or words to that effect, not spoken sarcastically but pleadingly. The crawling, the impotence, the shame of it—felt even now! Why could I not call on even a smidgen of Butley's cruel, nasty wit—precisely what I now suspect would have waked Marchand up? Later on, we'll see more of this character failure—the fear of not being loved, the fear of conflict.

—At the same time, and with only seeming paradox, teaching is a life that offers daily temptations to egotistical triumph. This obstacle to real teaching is more easily satirized than discussed sympathetically (as I tried to do in "The Good Teacher as Threat," Occasion 18 below). A class of eighteen-year-olds, each of whom knows that "success in life" depends in part on how this absolute dictator assigns final grades, can be the most misleading of all captive audiences except cowed citizens in a police state. How can they *not* laugh at my jokes—so long as I make them obvious enough? How can they *not* use flattery, subtle or blatant?

Here is an attempt to show how that works, in a freshman class-hour excerpted from my someday-perhaps-to-be-completed novel, *Cass Andor*. Jeremiah Gemissant, a minor character, is in effect showing the world how much smarter he is than poor Cass, a freshman who has made the mistake of baring her soul in her first assigned essay:

Assistant Professor Gemissant was playing one of his favorite games, Stamping out Naïveté, and most of the kids in the class were loving it, and him. It was one of the moments when he felt best about his teaching, this moment late in the second week or early in the third, when he read aloud from one of the more amusing essays and commented as he read. Bursts of laughter were by now greeting every sentence, whether from the essay

itself or from his witty commentary. But it had taken a few moments of careful guidance to bring them to this point of bloodthirstiness.

Here is what they had heard so far:

"'Some people feel that you can make conclusions about life itself or about the whole modern world of today by looking at written evidence like what you find in newspapers.'

"Whenever I read a phrase like 'some people think' I wonder, which people? Does the author have anyone in mind, really? If so, why doesn't he or she . . . incidentally, I should just mention that I make it a point always to preserve the anonymity of the student when I read from a paper, unless the student himself, or herself, chooses to break the secret." Cass was already blushing so deeply that anyone looking at her knew the paper was hers.

"But as I was saying, who are 'some people'? Nobody, that's who." Only a smile or two, so far; they're not getting it. "'Some people feel' . . . the author surely means think, since there are no feelings mentioned." Still only faint smiles. ". . . 'that you can make conclusions'—I wonder if the author has asked himself or herself whether to 'make a conclusion' is a better thing to do than simply to conclude?"

Gemissant has mastered, self-consciously, that special rising intonation used by the younger generation to turn an indicative sentence into a bland interrogative, with a rising diphthong. "And I conclude that the author has not thought about it at all, but simply felt that to 'make a conclusion' is somehow fancier and thus more appropriate to college-level discourse than to conclude.

"'Conclusions about life itself'? Anybody know any life that is not life itself?" Titters. "But life itself does sound somehow more imposing, so it was slapped down, again presumably because it felt good." More titters; now we're coming; they're getting the pitch.

"'About the whole modern world of today'? Now we're beginning to discover the pattern of a kind of mind here, folks. 'Life *itself*' and 'the *whole* world.' Like wow!" Real laughter at last.

So now he had them; every sentence a boffo. An act like that can go on for a long time, even if you're not the victim. So I spare you, as Cass was not spared, his comment on her second sentence: "But anybody who thinks about it at all will see that newspapers report mainly the bad things about life or the world." But here he is again, on the third:

"'The old saying goes, if dog bites man, no news; if man bites dog, that's news.' I must say, class, that I've been reading student papers now for five years, and I had begun to hope that I'd live my professional life to the end without having to read that tired saying for the one-hundred-and-

fiftieth time. But here it is, and the self-protection of 'the old saying' doesn't really help it much."

And the fourth:

"'Well, I would like to suggest . . .' Well, if you'd sort of like to suggest, why don't you go ahead and suggest instead of backing into the sentence this way, like a shy high school girl going to her first prom." Real guffaws now; got 'em! But many of those who were laughing hardest were by now—and Jeremiah Gemissant did not know this, indeed never discovered this to his retiring day—already inwardly drying up, thinking: If he objects to all that, nothing, nothing I can ever say can get past him, let alone please him. I'm doomed, doomed, we're all doomed, but meanwhile let's make sure that this rival is dead; grading here will be of degrees of badness, and let us hope this is the worst.

"'. . . that the saying should read, if man strokes dog and dog returns stroke with deep and lasting affection, no news: if dog bites man, news—if the man is an important citizen; if dog bites man and has rabies, then that's news!' Note how the epigrammatic quality of the original saying, banal as it is, has now been turned into preachy sententiousness." Alas, there was no one there to note that Gemissant was allowing himself certain stylistic latitudes denied to all the rest.

"But let us hurry on. 'I would suggest . . .' Oh, no, not again, shy creature . . ."

And so on Assistant Professor Jeremiah Gemissant went, line by line, phrase by phrase, through the most miserable hour of Cass's hitherto almost carefree life.

The self-flattery can spill over from class to paper-grading time. How smart can Jeremiah appear to himself, sitting alone with red pencil flashing?

Mechanics: B
Style: C
Argument: F

Dorcas Andor
Freshman Humanities
October 5, 1967
Mr. Gemissant

A good clean paper, Cass—but one that says nothing. I'm afraid we must talk about it.

What I believe Most Strongly:

What I believe most strongly is that the universe is love, and that all human beings deserve love and can learn from love. God created the world so that people could learn how to love and how to learn, and he gave every person the essential equipment for progressing in love. The misery in the world is caused because people have failed to give other people the love that they need. If

everybody would just work harder in loving, the main troubles of the world would be solved —e.g., war, crime, political conniving—all these are obviously the direct result of lack of love.

I believe, secondly, that the world is progressing. Though there have been many ups and downs throughout recorded history, on the whole, more and more people are learning the importance of love, and practicing love in the world. Though I have already read in this course some authors who think the world is getting worse rather than better, to me what they say seems just silly. Everybody I know of is constantly improving, except for those who have not been given the love they need. Sometimes when I think of the whole universe, getting better and better as more and more people learn how to love, I could almost burst with the feeling of being part of all that. And I sometimes cannot help wondering, when it feels so wonderful to me, why so many people take so long in discovering the joys of love and progress. This is one of those things I would like to find out, what is holding things back.

Third and last, I believe in education. There is so much to learn that everyone can have a whole life time of learning if he wants it. And if there is a life after death (I don't list that as something I believe strongly, but it seems to me the most plausible hypothesis of all hypotheses I can think of) then we could go on learning forever, and that would to me be a great thing. I can't believe that God would plan this desire for eternal learning and growing in me and then frustrate it by making my death from this life final. Surely there is a divine plan that includes all my beliefs and many more that I will learn about in my next life.

—The teaching life is at the same time a life that offers many genuine rewards, though the rewards are always suspect if scrutinized with the very kind of critical attention that is required in practicing the profession: "What's your evidence?" If, after a couple of weeks in the term, you decide to yourself that you are doing a splendid job, and that *they* are, too, you can fully expect that in the next week you will discover unmistakable signs—perhaps when you give a quiz, or when you read the first batch of papers—that you have apparently so far taught them nothing.

And nobody else's testimony is any more reliable than your own.

May 12, 1978

Mary was in today to say how my class has changed her life; indeed she is going to become an English major as a result.

"Well" (you always ask yourself) "does she mean it, or is she just working for an A? And if she does mean it, is that good? What sort of service is it to someone to turn her into an English major? How will I ever know?"

The phone rings and it is the dean telling you that you are to receive an award for excellent teaching, based partly on the students' evaluation forms and letters of praise. You glow for a few minutes or hours or weeks, but sooner or later you remember just what you have always said about the unreliability of student evaluations. And before long your triumph turns to ashes and thence—if you are lucky—to an ironic awareness that you just don't know whether you are any good or not.

—For these and other reasons, teaching is a life that exposes every flaw of character. It requires impossible measures of such old-fashioned virtues as courage, persistence, humility, and attention to other people's needs, even when they seem to conflict with your own. You are granted what at first looks like a great gift: unusual freedom of choice about how to spend your time. But that means unusual temptation to slack off. For most of us the specified hours amount to around six to twelve hours per week of class time for only nine months a year. During the nine months, you can simply cancel a class here and there, at least if you have tenure, with no serious tangible consequences, and your summers *can* be spent fishing or dealing in real estate.[5] Thus only what used to be called "inner resources" will prevent some kind of decay.

5. This year, 1987, one graduate assistant I know of—not in English—was discovered to have canceled nine of thirty scheduled classes. She will not be re-hired, but I have known professors who got away with worse track records.

February 20, 1984

What is hardest is staying fresh. Freshpersons meet, after a few years, stalepersons. I've taught "Soliloquy of a Spanish Cloister" perhaps 20 times by now, and I know the poem by heart. So what is there to prepare? I can go into that classroom, on this Monday morning, two weeks before the end of term, and coast, with no visible signs of staleness. They'll think the class OK. But I'll know that I'm going through the old motions.

In the shower, I am trying to think about what to do with the Princeton lectures, already anguishingly close upon me. And I am simultaneously trying to think about how to improve the draft of the Nebraska paper on Pluralism.[6] But suddenly, from another layer of anxiety, I am thinking about how Browning relates to the short stories I read Saturday by Jonathan Penner [*Private Parties*, New York, 1983]—splendid short stories, subtle inferences demanded—just like "Soliloquy" really. Ah, that's it. We can begin that class, we will begin that class, with a short reading from the opening of one of those stories, then a brief discussion of how we read the signs of character in such stories and in poems like "Soliloquy." And then we'll be really into "Soliloquy," which they'll be already thoroughly prepared on because of having to hand in a paper this morning on what they know, or can guess, about the characters.

The point is that the Penner has sprung into my plans from an unconscious level demanding that I make this next class go—tired or not, stale on Browning or not. I care about that class, now, and I am exhilarated about facing it an hour from now. "Soliloquy" no longer seems old; rather, it is an instance of what is perpetually new.

It is never clear just how long one can keep that process going—the interest in teaching that takes over the mind involuntarily in the shower. (Of course it is precisely that interest that prevents me from getting any of my "real work" done when I have any kind of teaching schedule. When the subtler levels of the mind are working on the next class, they are not working on a rhetoric of fiction or a theory of pluralism—except on those blessed occasions when the needs of the course jibe with the current writing project.)

On many a morning, what I have called the "process" simply grinds to a halt.

6. "Pluralism in the Classroom." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Spring 1986): 468–79.

January 20, 1981

"Phyllis, I just don't think I feel up to meeting my classes today. I think I'll just stay in bed. I'm sure I have a fever; I think that thermometer must be broken. . . ."

I lie there, throat sore, mind sluggish, except for panicky images of facing the class without a word to say. "What *did* we do yesterday? What *was* it I promised to take up today? Where *are* last year's notes on [Zora Neale Hurston's] *Their Eyes Were Watching God?* What *were* those reasons I gave myself last week for thinking this the best of all professions?"

In spite of the temptations to abuse our freedom, most of us most of the time find a way, unlike Butley, to keep the business going: we leave that bed, load up on this or that cough medicine or tranquilizer or stronger elixir, and drag ourselves to the campus, hoping that something will happen to turn this into one of the better days. Yet all the time we have the threatening knowledge that if we don't turn up, or if we turn up unprepared, or if we don't read and comment on that last batch of papers, indeed even if we decide to call in sick and take the week off and go to Las Vegas, only the neglected students will likely notice.

March 3, 1975

As I am leaving Cobb Hall, our central classroom building, I meet a colleague, a man once judged to be one of the best teachers on campus, now known to be having a "little trouble with alcohol."

"How are things going, Hank?"

"Not so good, Wayne. You know about my divorce? That's taking most of my time. Actually I'm fed up to here with my teaching, just coasting, if you want to know the truth. Fortunately the students can't tell the difference."

Actually the campus is full of students' complaints about Hank's decline as a teacher. How might I help him? I see no way.

Now it strikes me that I didn't think hard enough about how to get through to him. The point is that he could have gone on like that, or even worse than that, indefinitely, with no consequences except perhaps a salary slightly lower than that of his functioning colleagues.

This particular story, unlike many such, has a cheerful ending. Hank "suddenly" became his old self again, teaching vigorously, no longer drinking, no longer kidding himself about what it takes to do a good class. Somehow his character finally came through. I suspect, however, that in most

other professions he would have met external constraints, and perhaps even supports, much sooner.

II · Some Obstacles to Good Teaching

It is long since time to attempt a somewhat more systematic account of some of the obstacles that can not only turn good teachers into bad, but drive them from the profession entirely

OBSTACLE 1: WORKLOAD, PAY SCALE, AND PUBLIC MISUNDERSTANDING

I won't dwell on this obstacle here, since so much of the rest of this book is devoted to it. But it is important to say once again, as strongly as possible, that the disparity between what our various publics expect of us and what they are willing to pay is a major source of our failures.

Meanwhile, every teacher knows—though it's difficult, perhaps impossible to "prove"—that to teach reading and writing and thinking requires personal, individual attention to students' responses, and that, up to a point, the smaller the student load the better the results. It is true that some studies purport to show that class size makes no real difference. But nobody who has tried to teach English to more than twenty or thirty students at a time will believe those studies. To teach English, at whatever level, means to teach writing, and teachers of writing, if they have too many students, and if they are conscientious, burn themselves out fast, faster than any teachers except those who work with the handicapped and delinquent. The burden, the cross, of English teaching is the task of reading and responding personally and intelligently to batches of "bad writing."

I am really puzzled, Arnie [a freshman], *by what happens in this one, as compared to your first two. Did you simply put things off until too late? Your second paper* said *something that interested me and the students in your tutorial. This one—well, we must talk about it. You spoke well in class about [William] James's argument against abstract reasoning. Why don't you give a single quotation here as evidence for your claim that his argument is mistaken?*[7]

7. Italicized comments are verbatim copies of what I have written to students over the years. I have had to work hard to resist the temptation to make up smarter ones for my purposes here.

March 10, 1987

I'm surprised to be surprised by the fresh discovery of what I've discovered so often in the past: how much harder it is to *teach every student* in a class of 25 freshmen than in a class of 15.

When I taught Introduction to Humanities two years ago, I took pleasure in attending to each of the 15 students. That meant not only attending to each of the fifteen during our class discussions—no one can be allowed to hide. It meant also a lot of hard work on individual writing and reading problems. It included some nursing of wounded psyches and listening to life histories too much like too many other life histories I've listened to. It even required a couple of hospital visits, when "mononucleosis" (or some psychic simulacrum) struck a couple of them (as it always seems to when the pressure is on), and a couple of letters home to support the students' desire to stick it out in spite of unpromising starts that discouraged the financially pressed parents. After twenty weeks with me and ten with Gregory Colomb, all fifteen were in there pitching; all fifteen finished their first year honorably, and they were all back as sophomores—and again as juniors! Most of them are here again this year, and I'll have the pleasure of seeing them receive their diplomas in June.

This winter, in contrast, I "picked up" twenty-five, in a section of Greek Thought and Literature. Of course by now, in the tenth week, I "know" them all pretty well, in one sense. I've long since sorted out the names and faces, and distinguished those strange stereotyped pairings that often plague me. (Carolyn Heilbrun has reported that Lionel Trilling never managed to distinguish her from the only other woman in a graduate seminar; she claims that "women" were for him somehow all alike. My final problem this term has been distinguishing dark, handsome Kathleen O'Leary and dark, handsome Pegeen McCarthy—all that Irishness—and with yet another Kathleen in the class! That task took me about seven weeks, with my mind of course always on "higher things.")

Now, in the tenth week, I do not feel that I have really *taught* all twenty-five; I've *met* head-on only about ten of them, if by *meeting* one means an encounter that is likely to make a permanent difference. Though I've had private conferences with all, and my teaching intern and I have conducted several five-student tutorials with all, and though they've all written four substantial papers and one or more re-writes, I've managed to attend to the *particular* needs of only a small number. One young man in danger of failing college has taken endless hours of my time and of David Hanson's time and of various counselors' time in the Student Resource Center; we may salvage a C for him, perhaps even a B, since his last paper was a B−. [He did not return for a second year. Where *is* that poor lost

soul in May of 1988?] But meanwhile, I didn't get around to phoning Jeff when he was absent four times in a row (yes, it *was* mononucleosis, and he got all the reading done while lying in bed, so he'll survive—but even so, he might have been lying dead in a gutter for all I knew). And I didn't find time to talk with Sandra about the death of her mother, or with Sacha about his brush with the Swiss Army when it tried to draft him.

Why is it that even a College as proud of giving personal attention and "small-class instruction" as ours cannot understand that every freshman needs to be treasured in at least one group of no more than twelve to fifteen students? Almost any student who receives the kind of attention I can give, and do give, in a group of that size, can survive any amount of benign neglect in other courses. But when students find themselves anonymous in all four "small" classes (25 to 35, or even larger), how are they to discover the excitement of this place?

I am trying to dramatize a national failure to spend our money on the most important single problem—the education of citizens who can read and listen and think and write and speak effectively. The lack of individual attention is acute in every field, but I think it is most harmful in the teaching of "composition," "rhetoric," "communication"—*writing*. Learning to write requires more individual attention from the teacher than any other form of learning—far more than even the closest rival. (My own choice of "rival" would be learning to play the cello: what would I have learned, when at the age of thirty-three I "took up the cello" for the first time, if I had been taught in a group of twenty-five or fifty other learners, by a teacher trying to deal with three, four, or five similar groups?) Obviously our failure is most damaging in our elementary schools, high schools, and junior colleges, where English teachers—often called by other titles—frequently find themselves trying somehow to teach as many as two hundred students in four or even five or six sections. In such circumstances the students often write nothing; or if they write anything it is not read or is read inadequately. If the teacher is initially conscientious, he or she is quickly driven to despair. The plain truth is that almost no one with any fiscal responsibility has recognized the preconditions of any successful writing course.

Working with Ph.D. dissertations should be different, one might think. Written by prospective "doctors" of the subject, they surely don't need the detailed attention one gives to freshman essays. Not so: even those rare ones that are written with some fluency and care require detailed attention to every page—the same sort of rigorous attention one has to give to one's own first drafts.

I THOUGHT I had understood your outline and prospectus, Arthur, but by now in this chapter [his second draft of the third chapter] *I am utterly baffled about your organization. Where ARE we?*

In spite of the spirit-crushing loads, most of us keep on trying to say something hopeful. Though I cannot pretend to have got beyond "unread MS neurosis" I have found a kind of solution in the typewriter and—even better—in the word processor. Instead of filling the pages with innumerable abbreviations in red pencil ("gr.," "pn.," "par.," etc.), most of which most students ignore unless they are required to submit revisions, I usually manage to type discursive comments, trying to make them intelligible as direct talk to the student's specific problems. I ask myself "What is the problem that *this* student can most profitably concentrate on *now?*" Then I match my comments to numbers in the paper's margins.

Once I get at the task I positively enjoy it, because I'm "talking" with somebody about something that interests me. (Getting at the task is something else again. It is almost never a pleasure in advance.) The student receives what amounts to a letter from me about the project, and ideally he or she does not get the impression that writing the next paper is a hopeless task. It is true that my "letter" does not take less time than "grading" used to take me when I felt responsible for marking every comma splice and dangler; it usually takes more. But the time does not feel like something robbed from my life.

As I sort of anticipated, Anna [a junior], *yours is one of the papers that interested me most—in fact, it almost meets what you take to be* [J. H.] *Hexter's supreme criterion, by being fun. We must talk about it, but meanwhile I have to start qualifying the praise with the obvious point that the paper is really a pretty poor job, if judged by the standards it sets for itself. It implies that its author is ready to take Hexter on at his own level, to meet him in combat, and to defeat him. But (as you may suspect—who knows?) Hexter could wipe the floor with you. . . .*

Do you know the old story about Emerson (I think it was, or maybe it was William James, or maybe Channing) attacking Plato in his first paper at Harvard? The teacher wrote, "When you shoot at a king, don't miss." Hexter is not a king, but he's a lot tougher prince than you make out.

I know that my solution cannot be used in the same way by everyone. I can use it only because my student load is relatively light, because my students come to me already accustomed to turning out half-passable two-page essays, and because I type fast. But I have found that even the most badly

prepared students respond when the teacher applies the principle, "Fewer Comments of Higher Quality."

Since I write 150–300 words on most short papers (and for B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. research papers it is often much more than that), I figure that I must have written something like eight million words in this peculiarly drab literary genre. If you add to those words the half million or so churned into letters of recommendation, I begin to rival the great letter-writers like Voltaire—in quantity. Of course, if you then divide by the number of repetitions—of catchwords, of "encouraging phrases," of expressions of alarm—the total number shoots down by 573 percent.

Is *that* a good way to spend one's life? Surprisingly enough, even after re-reading just now hundreds of these comments in cold blood, I still think so. But let no one pretend that essay-reading is sufficiently rewarding, in itself, to justify giving any writing teacher an eighty-student load.

The first par. is not as bad as you led me to expect, Eli [a junior], *but it's not a grabber. It does run over your conclusions—but not in a way that raises interesting problems for the reader. You assume a ready-made reader (me, I suppose), who knows the memos cold* [the assignment was to appraise the rhetoric of three memos from a dean who must do some firing] *and who won't really be interested in reading about them once again. Why not assume (and let me in on the act as an observer) someone who has read them badly? Then raise a problem, rather than just announcing results.*

OBSTACLE 2: RIVAL INTERESTS AND DEMANDS

Probably every age tries its best to keep teachers from teaching well. Every age presents rival interests, rival pressures, rival ideals that teach teachers to undervalue what they do. The governess and tutor in the upper-class family of the nineteenth century were "told" by every social arrangement that what they did as teachers was not as important as what their higher-status charges would do, after they were taught. The business of the world has always been "business," not teaching. Though teachers in our culture may in fact receive more encouragement than they would have in earlier times, "everyone who is anybody" still clearly values other matters more than conducting a good class.

March 6, 1978

This morning, sitting in my library study with the door locked against all intruders, where no student can reach me no matter how serious his/her problem. . . . No, no. Try: where no students can reach me no matter

how serious their problems? The revision weakens the particular image. In any case, I am thinking of a particular young woman out there, desperate about how to read the third sentence of paragraph three of the Hume we are to discuss tomorrow—wishing that she could ask Mr. Booth about it, dropping by my office and hearing the secretary say, "I don't know *where* he is this morning. No doubt in the library, working on his book." Sitting where no student, as I was saying, can come to be taught, I must begin revising chapter 5 of *Critical Understanding*. Instead, I am scribbling about teaching. The scribbling is as much an obstacle to actual teaching as revising chapter 5 would be. Surely the chief obstacle to my teaching is that my so-called scholarship is honored for several hours each day, by both my institution, which provides this private study and requires me not to meet students here, and by my ego and curiosity, which require me to keep at this resisting book, whatever the costs to my teaching.

Am I to dwell, then, on that outworn topic, scholarship versus teaching? Publish or perish? Bromide!—as my college teacher, P. A. Christensen, would have said. Platitude! Clichéd false dichotomy! Indeed it *is* a misleading dichotomy. Just think of all that can be said against it: If I had not engaged in "scholarship," would I not now be dried-up *as a teacher?*

1. No scholarship → no learning; 2. No learning → too much repetition of increasingly tired truths; 3. Too much repetition → growing hatred of students who demand it. Just last week I heard a colleague say, "If I have to teach *War and Peace*—a book I once loved—just one more time I'll go mad." What's more, my "scholarship" profits from my teaching.

Yes, all that can be truly said, in a hundred different ways. But the fact remains that this quarter I am teaching no classes, having pled "overwork," and the overwork consists of finishing my book, reading manuscripts for our press (and one for Princeton), reading dissertations and other scholars' manuscripts, lecturing at other colleges (o ho! o ho! as Caliban says; here's a confession indeed): my *chief* business these two terms, my busyness, is lecturing on eight other campuses, two days each, for Phi Beta Kappa. That's surely *not* pure scholarship. Do I count it as *teaching?*

Start over: The *chief* obstacle to sustained, serious teaching for me in my time is the racket I've got into of barnstorming other campuses, moving in for the one-shot kill and moving away fast, so that nobody can pick the holes in my brilliant, witty, learned presentations. I have become a sophist—like how many others? In theory we might defend ourselves as *good* sophists, able to construct a solid defense of our rhetoric as the center of education, eager to reconstruct what a good Sophist, talking with Socrates,

would really have said in reply to Plato's unfair attacks. But in practice I often become a bad sophist: a "speech preparer," trained to make not just the worse cause, but any old cause seem like "the better one."

March 22, 1978

These lectures I have prepared for those undergraduates at Cornell, St. Lawrence, St. Catherine's, Augustana, North Dakota, Chicago Circle, St. Olaf, and Lehigh, are designed to stimulate hard thought. But they are at best the preliminary to teaching, not teaching.

Being on a campus two days is better, of course, than being there for one appearance, as I often have been in the past. Students do get a chance to come up and ask whether you really meant what you said, and you can then say, "Not really. What I should have said was . . ." But not often, not many. And meanwhile, there is that young woman back in Chicago, puzzling over Hume, being taught this quarter by God only knows what kind of incompetent, cruel, ignorant, indifferent betrayer of the cause, longing for a talk with somebody who will take the time to work through the paragraph with her. And I, I am . . .

April 26, 1978

On the road, I find myself wondering how I ever got into this. What strange combination of greed, ego, and altruism led me to think that it would be either service to the world or a tolerable thing in itself, to visit eight colleges for two days each, giving identical lectures at college after college?

As the year drags toward the end—two more colleges to go—I dread the next flight, the next attempt to screw up my energy and make a show of it. When I fly this afternoon to St. Olaf, I'll find myself already beginning to feel the tension. Even today, my "day of rest," I have gone through the two speeches for tomorrow, making a twenty-minute version of one for the chapel service, revising the other slightly because of yesterday's discovery that something didn't quite track. Chatauqua! Lyceum!

I think of all those lyceum speakers who used to come to Brigham Young University when I was a student. The lucky ones had some poetry to read: Carl Sandburg, Robert Frost. The hacks read their old lectures—was it Carl van Doren who lost his place one night and couldn't find it again? The great Tabernacle in Provo would be packed—how could that be? Have I misremembered?—and I would listen with every nerve, hoping for news from the great world.

I now know that many of these speakers had news from nowhere, had spoken those words already too many times. And here I am, doing the

same thing. By now, the points—an attack on simplicities, a defense of rhetoric, "Can Art be Bad for You?"—seem not just labored but simple-minded, distorted, possibly bad for my listeners. I've had more than enough of this—I should be back home, teaching my own classes in the kind of sustained way that alone makes any difference.

May 1, 1978

But now I have been to St. Olaf, and the whole crazy process seems entirely justified. The speeches, which seemed drab when delivered to drab audiences, seem just fine when delivered to responsive audiences. The twenty-minute version, cut from the one-hour talk, "It's More Complicated Than That," seems positively inspired, as the three hundred or four hundred students laugh and applaud. "Critical Pluralism," given to faculty members who actually have faced rhetorical problems, seems to me almost profound. The social hour turns into a stimulating discussion. The pleasure all this gives tells me just how much I do want to make a difference, and it changes my sense of why it was that I undertook this Phi Beta Kappa stint in the first place: I thought that I *might* make a difference.

How much of a difference? Well, when you think of the 2500 colleges in America, or of the 875 Phi Beta Kappa local chapters, you can't believe that visits to eight colleges, two of them quite dispiriting, are going to transform the American educational scene. But would the same energy put into writing a book addressed to all such audiences have accomplished a lot more? I'll never know.

May 10, 1978

The *chief* obstacle to my teaching *at the moment* is my half-baked plan for a book about teaching. The truth is that I am sitting in my library study, at 9:30 of a Wednesday morning, "officially" finishing off, even thinking of killing, chapter 5 of *Critical Understanding*, but actually working up these notes for *Teacher*—a book about a teacher who, instead of working with his students on Hume, spent his time in the library writing a book about teaching.

Why did he do that? "Officially" because it is important not just to teach your immediate students. The world of 1978 (it'll be 1983, '84, before it comes out?)—the world of 1984 needs to be reminded of the seriousness of teaching, of the presence on our scene of thousands of dedicated teachers and students. What they do is not ludicrous (all of the time); teaching and learning are graces of their—our—lives.

Yet—is this my point?—yet there *is* a kind of befouling of my life as teacher in the act of escaping students (*and* my scholarship) to begin writ-

ing a book about the importance of teaching English as a rhetorician. If that teaching is so rewarding, why don't I get on with it, rather than moving into this totally private world, the door safely locked against students, to write about it?

No matter what I choose to write here in the library, should I not worry that even this university, which values teaching more than most universities, cares more for—rewards more visibly—what I do "in here" than what I might do "out there?" If I had been the best undergraduate teacher in the country when I was at Earlham College for nine years, even if I had been *known* to be the best, pronounced best in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine* (what a fantasy!), no major university would ever have sought me out to bless their undergraduates. Only with the publication of a *book* did the great world suddenly decide that I was valuable. My point is not now to decide whether "the world" was wrong in this judgment (see "The Scholar in Society," Occasion 3 above, for the complexities plaguing any such judgment). It is rather to underline one reason why even those of us who have tried to learn how to teach have been so often deflected from teaching.

OBSTACLE 3: THE HECTIC PACE

By Thursday afternoon of each week I breathe a sigh of relief—except when I have Friday classes: I have almost made it through another week without disaster. Major disaster would be a complete unmasking of my gross ignorance. Minor disasters seem to fill my life, in surprisingly diverse forms:

—A student or colleague mentions an "essential" book that I not only have not read but have not even heard of.

—The phone rings and someone says, "Why have you failed to come to the oral for Louise Jefferson?" Or, "Did you forget that you were to speak in Mandel starting ten minutes ago?" (Yes, that one actually happened. James Redfield has recently suggested a new word, "clong," for the awful tightening of gut and brain that such moments bring.)

1978, undated, Friday afternoon

Last week on Monday the phone rang.

"Hi, Mr. Booth. You all set for Friday?"

"Friday?"

"Yes, you know. The talk to the 400 junior college teachers, Friday at noon."

"Oh. [Brief pause, brief as I can make it.] Is that *this* Friday?"

Long pause.

"Yes, yes. This Friday. Noon. Have you forgotten?"

one kind of knowledge that every man should have that is not available to women: namely, how to listen to those who have been the chief victims of our vast hordes of hirelings, our hack metaphorists. The chances are very high that each of you men, sitting here, has been seriously maimed already by your culture. The chances are high that you have, even during this lecture, thought occasionally of the woman sitting next to you as a toolbox, or as a candy machine, rather than as a potential friend who might teach you something about how to become a self.

How do I know? Because it takes one to know one. Let's step over into the corner here, and I'll tell you a wonderful joke about this beautiful chick who comes into this bar, and she walks up to this cool stud, and she says . . .

Will you let me finish that story without criticism? If you do, you're no friend of mine.

OCCASION 12 · *To Fourscore Graduate Students Training To Be Teachers*

What Little I Think I Know about Teaching

As I was thinking last week about what should be said to a bunch of graduate students preparing to be teachers, I met a colleague in the corridor of Regenstein Library. A winner of the Quantrell Prize for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, he had just seen the announcement of this event ["The Student as Text"] and he growled: "You know and I know that all that stuff is crap. Nothing is really known about how to teach well; the most that could be known would be how to make students like the class and the professor and thus believe, probably erroneously, that they have been taught something worth learning." Greatly encouraged by this outburst I happened to meet a professor of education here in the hall, and I asked him, "Phil, what is really *known* about teaching?" His reply: "Not much! I'm just reviewing an eleven-hundred-page book summarizing educational research. In my view, the book is pretty discouraging. There's really not a lot of hard knowledge to report."

I next looked into a little book sent me by a former student, *A Celebration of Teachers*.[1] I found some wonderfully inspirational memories by fa-

Opening talk to a day-long workshop at the University of Chicago, 1987.

1. National Council of Teachers of English (Urbana, Ill., 1985). The card catalogue of my university library indicates that we own something like fifteen hundred books about teachers and teaching. And that's not even counting the great philosophical works—Plato's at the head of the list—that teach about teaching by sheer force of example. How many of these, I wonder, would have helped me become a better teacher? Some that have in fact helped are: Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Teacher* (New York, 1963); Jacques Barzun's *Teacher in America* (New York, 1945); John Erskine's *My Life as a Teacher* (Philadelphia, 1948); Gilbert Highet's *The Art of Teaching* (New York, 1950); R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* (Chicago, 1945); John Passmore's *The Philosophy of Teaching* (London, 1980); and Joe Axelrod's obscure little pamphlet on "The Discussion Technique in the College Classroom" (or some such title), published sometime in the late forties and now, so far as my own shelves can tell me, lost to the world. More important than any of these have been thousands of staff meetings and conversations with colleagues in America and England, especially Harold and Connie Rosen and James Britton. I am of course not even beginning to list the many works that have influenced my

mous people, mostly writers, describing the unsung great teachers who changed their lives: Peter de Vries telling how John De Boer, his first high school English teacher, teaching one of his first classes, made his pupils into "kindred spirits, . . . responsive . . . to his dazzling mind, his richly humanitarian spirit, and his deep love of . . . literature"; Madeleine L'Engle remembering a sixth-grade teacher, also in her first teaching job, who "was the first person in all of my school life to see any potential talent in this shy, introverted child"; Bernard Malamud saying that Clara Molendyk "was very fond of her students and made us feel expansive, free, and useful"; Art Buchwald blessing Mrs. Marie Egorkin, at P.S. 35 in Hollis, New York, who, finding that Buchwald could not resist clowning, gave him the "opportunity to perform in front of the class in exchange for shutting up when she was trying to teach grammar." I wonder how many of you would be able to respond with similar memories, if asked—memories about some one or two teachers who made all the difference.

In any case, since I could find no clear line of pursuit in all that, I turned to a new book called *Distinguished Teachers on Effective Teaching*.[2] Again I found such a plethora of seemingly contradictory suggestions as to make me almost despair about our project today.

Clearly we should begin cautiously and humbly, though I hope not despairingly. We're talking about the most difficult and important of all arts. Like all arts, it surely must depend in part on knowledge, but like all arts it depends on knowledge that is elusive, manifold, and resistant to clear formulation.

In short, if generalizations are dangerous, and I think they usually are, they are especially dangerous about teaching. There is no recommendation that will work for all teachers, or, as my colleague James Redfield likes to say, "No teacher, not even the best, succeeds with every student, and there may be no teacher who succeeds with no one."

Suppose we begin by trying out three generalizations.

Good teaching is dramatic, colorful, lively, entertaining. Right? A dean at Earlham College thought so once, and when bad reports came in on the teaching of Mike Bossett, assistant professor of American history, he called the poor man in and told him to jazz things up a little. Bossett thought

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thinking about rhetoric or about *what* I ought to teach.

Readers who are curious about how post-structuralists think about teaching will find guidance and challenge and even considerable wisdom about the dangers of pedagogical certitudes (what I later call "the good teacher as threat") in *The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre*, ed. Barbara Johnson, *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982).

2. Edited by Peter Beidler, as no. 28 in the series New Directions for Teaching and Learning (San Francisco, 1986).

about it and appeared before his class in History of the American Frontier next day sporting a Davy Crockett costume, shooting off a cap pistol and shouting "Yippee-ee-ee!" The result, *almost* needless to say, was disastrous. Last year a professor of physics at Harvard taught his unit on jet propulsion by putt-putting himself into the classroom in a jet-propelled wheelchair, repeating the act later as he left the hall. I can't help wondering whether his students were as contemptuous, deep down, as Mike Bossett's.

At the opposite extreme from such shenanigans is my memory of one of the teachers who taught me most in graduate school. George Williamson violated every technique of good teaching that anyone has ever thought of. He would come into the classroom and shuffle, shifty-eyed, to a little platform, open an attaché case in front of him in such a way as to preclude all eye contact, focus his eyes alternately on the text and a far high corner of the room, and proceed to explicate T. S. Eliot's poems. It took me several weeks to realize that I was learning a lot, far more than I had learned in many a more engaging class.

Try another generalization: *Good teaching results from passionate engagement with the subject.* Well, of course it sometimes does, but I've known, indeed I now know, teachers who are deeply learned in and passionate about their subjects who just don't get through to even the best students, except at the most advanced levels, and then rarely. By the same token I know others whose learning is superficial and casual, who care more indeed about the stock exchange than about scholarship, but who in teaching younger students manage to wake up the sleepy, convert the hostile, and change lives in what I consider good directions. Perhaps even more significantly, I can honestly say that my own worst teaching has often been about those subjects on which I consider myself expert. The novel that I have taught most ineptly, the one that I now refuse to teach, is the one I did my dissertation on, *Tristram Shandy*. I just know too much about it—and I try to stuff it all in at once.

Third generalization: *Good teaching results from caring for students; from "teaching the child, not the subject," as the cliché goes; from "teaching the whole person"; or, in the terms of our program today, from taking the student as "text" rather than, say, Socrates, Shakespeare, Thucydides, or the second law of thermodynamics.* Since most of what I want to say might seem to be a recommendation of this one, I won't dwell on the exceptions to these claims—there's no use in turning you off at the beginning. But I do want to underline the following warning: Perhaps more bad teaching has resulted from a misapplied concentration on personality exchange, in the name of serving the student rather than the subject, than from any other one practice.

Having offered those warnings against any generalizations you hear from anybody *else* today, I shall now of course offer some hard, indubitable truths about teaching, my own deep wisdom acquired through four decades of perpetual anxiety and frequent failure.

Actually I have only one, a big one, one that I really believe in, with no surrounding ironies or discountings: *Bad teaching most often results from a pursuit of the wrong ends*, either because the teacher is unclear about his or her purposes or because plausible but harmful purposes get in the way of good ones. Of course there are many legitimate purposes of teaching, depending on different subject matters and circumstances. But I want to suggest that in America today one purpose that is legitimate for some occasions has been allowed to intrude harmfully on too many occasions where it is not only inappropriate but destructive: I mean the aim of conveying information, of *covering material.* We are an information-burdened society, and the loading of information into minds conceived as memory banks has come to dominate far too much of our educational practice. Much of the information-loading is of course described in fancy, respectable terms. One current prominent movement in my field calls it "imparting cultural literacy" (see Preface, note 4). In science courses it is often disguised as something called "problem-solving." That title makes it sound active and somehow connected with thinking, but the student is too often left going through the motions that no real problem-solver ever went through—the abstracted paths that were worked out as a retrospective explanation after the problems had been solved. In history, information-loading has long been deplored, but it is still, I would judge, the main goal of far too much instruction.

Of course there are many occasions when information-loading is proper or even necessary. But I think they occur mainly in the pre-college years. We are here talking about *college* teaching, and there is one crucial difference between teaching a sixth-grader, say, and teaching a college student. The pupil has to go on to the seventh grade whether he or she wants to or not; the college student is free to drop the subject permanently at the end of the course. As our appalling attrition rates tell us, college students are free to proclaim, "Never again."

So I like to think about a different goal, one that doesn't prevent all imparting of information, but one that certainly complicates our thinking about what we are up to: *Good college teaching is the kind that promises to make the teacher finally superfluous, the kind that leads students to want to continue work in the given subject and to be able to, because they have the necessary intellectual equipment to continue work at a more advanced level.* A crass way of putting this goal is to say that the good teacher is out to make converts to his or her field—not necessarily to turn students into majors or professionals in the field, but to turn them into adults who will continue learning in that field, either as professionals or as amateurs. William James once said that you could tell an educated person by his or her way of reading the daily newspaper. (Of course James said "his", not "his or her"). That may seem like a fairly low-level goal. But what kind of success could a teacher claim if a student, ten years later, meeting the subject in some journal, popular or learned, turned away from it in disgust or with the conviction that only boredom lay ahead?

What follows for teaching when the teacher tries to ensure that students will *want* to continue and will *be able to* continue after the end of ten weeks or a year or four years? Note that our goal is not that the student should want to continue *with this teacher;* that kind of loving attachment is relatively easy to obtain—and often dangerous when it comes. Love of the teacher is not a goal of teaching but a dispensable and often dangerous by-product of the goal, which, to repeat, is freedom from the teacher and critical attachment to the subject.

First and most important, it follows that any given course should be viewed not primarily as a preparation for some future course or future experience but *as an end in itself.* It may seem paradoxical to say that if you hope for a future that includes your subject, you must not teach to that future but to a delight in learning *in the present moment.* But it's not a paradox. Love cannot be prepared for with hate, at least not usually. What I have loved today I will want to have more of tomorrow. This means that ideally—and no teacher realizes the ideal—each day's class should be so rich in the excitement of learning that every student will say, at the end of the day, "The high point of my day was that class. I can't wait to see what we'll learn there tomorrow."

Obviously this doesn't mean that Mike Bossett was wise when he chose to dress up like Davy Crockett. Primarily it means for me that I can never be satisfied if I think students are not led, by the situations I set up, to take an active responsibility for what is going on now and what will go on next week. To deliver a lecture and assure myself that all the students are dutifully taking notes may give me the illusion that they are learning actively, and of course some kind of activity is going on even when notes are taken in boredom or hostility. But that kind of receptive role, even if the student retains some of what is received, I think of as passive, though educationists now seem to agree that there can be no such thing as utterly passive learning: to learn anything at all one must have an activated mind that *grasps* it, in whatever form. This must be so, if we mean by "passive" a simple blank indifference. And it is certainly true that the theorists I admire most, in con-

trast to what many prophets of artificial intelligence seem to say, agree that whatever the mind does is done by constructing, constituting, grasping, not just by "taking in" or receiving or containing or retaining. (If all those metaphors and the differences that they suggest interest you, I recommend a fine book about current controversies over the constitutive role of metaphor, *Metaphor and Thought*, edited by Andrew Ortony.)[3]

Perhaps a better contrast would be between *responsible engagement* and *obedient receptivity*. The kind of active learning I always hope to see more of is the kind that takes responsibility for where a given moment is to go, in contrast to the kind of receptivity that leaves it entirely to the teacher's authority to determine where things are to go.

If we take that contrast seriously, if we really pursue a responsible engagement, certain things follow about classroom practice. First, what does it say about the proportion of lecturing and discussion, and about the kind of lecturing and discussion we engage in? It clearly does *not* say that we should never lecture, or that all discussions will produce responsible engagement. But I think it does follow that a teacher has failed if students leave the classroom assuming that the task of thinking through to the next step lies entirely with the teacher. And I suggest that that doleful effect, that hurrying away after class to something else that is really engaging, is produced much more often by lecturing than by seriously planned and executed discussions.

It is no doubt true that highly skillful lecturers can earn the kind of engagement I have in mind. A good lecture, like a good essay or book, demands the thoughtful engagement of everyone within earshot. It's also painfully true that so-called discussions that simply drift, with no one holding anyone responsible for saying anything worth saying, and no progress made on some recognizable question, can leave students even more disengaged than if they had heard a good lecture. Some decades ago here in our College a group of teachers conducted a careful experiment comparing lectures and discussions. They chose a group of teachers who were thought to be among the best lecturers, and another group thought to be among the best discussion leaders. They then made audio tapes of their classes, and played them back to individual students. At regular intervals they would stop the tape and ask the student, "What were you thinking about at that point?" Recording the incidence of distraction—"I don't like the color of his tie"; "I don't like her hairdo"; "I can't think what to say to my boyfriend tonight"—as compared to the incidence of concentration *on the subject*, they got what were for them disappointing results. They were enthusiasts for the glories of discussion classes, and they found that the lecturers had

3. New York, 1979.

the attention of more students more of the time than did the discussion leaders. Shocking. So they went back and asked a different set of questions, focusing on the incidence of *active thought about where the current topic should lead or about how to do something with it*. On that one they found that discussions did considerably better than lectures. The bad news is that, as I remember it, neither lectures nor discussions did very well—I think about the best anyone managed was to keep about 25 percent of students, on average, away from distractions—though of course there were high points when nearly all were engaged, and other moments when almost no one was.

If there were time, I would be glad to offer you my complete and final list of principles for good discussion. But time is running out, so here are only three that follow obviously from our principles:

1. You gotta get them talking to each other, not just to you or to the air.

2. You gotta get them talking about the subject, not just having a bull session in which nobody really listens to anybody else. This means insisting on at least the following rule in every discussion: Whether I call on you or you speak up spontaneously, please address the previous speaker, *or* give a reason for changing the subject.

3. You gotta find ways to prevent yourself from relapsing into a badly prepared lecturette, disguised as a discussion. Informal lectures are usually worse than prepared ones.

Second, certain practices follow for reading and writing assignments and testing. I ask you to think back on the assignments you have been given, and the testing you have suffered—and then to think about just how little of that pile of stuff really *engaged* you in self-education. My own thinking in this way leads me to use fewer examinations, fewer quizzes, and more essay assignments, including frequent one-pagers that require students to come up with pertinent questions and possible answers to them. You don't know anything about a subject until you can put your knowledge into some kind of expression. Trying to put it into a form of intelligible expression is usually the best path to active engagement rather than obedient receptivity.

Finally, in this little list of untrustworthy generalizations, I would urge you to resist planning too far in advance. Just how far too far is may be hard to determine, but it is extremely difficult to teach engaged responsibility when you have fixed all the fights from the beginning. Leave room for improvisation, even as you are walking toward the class. It was Art Buchwald's teacher's improvisation at a specific moment that leads him to honor her now. Leave the reading list to some degree open, so that when you discover an unusually well-prepared or badly prepared group you can shift gears. Above all, leave room for your own learning—for the chance to discover and teach something you didn't know when the course began. After all, our

basic choice of purposes here should apply to you as well as to your students: will *you* want to continue learning about and teaching this subject a year from now or ten years from now? Not if you've gained nothing from what happens in the encounter—nothing more, that is, than the sense that students came out with what *you* had when you went in. That's not enough; every class should be for you as much as for the students, and it cannot be that unless there are many moments of opening out into unforeseen learning.

The art of teaching a given class or student a given body of data is one thing. The art of building a life as a teacher is quite another. Good teaching, whether judged by what is good for the student or good for the teacher, might be identified by a simple thought experiment that I sometimes conduct for myself when I feel discouraged about how little my students seem to learn. Picture either the student or yourself at the end of the year, thinking back on the course, or at the end of four years, thinking back on many courses. Word comes over TV or radio that that nuclear war we all dread is upon us, Chicago has been targeted by the enemy, President Reagan's "Star Wars" is failing as badly as everybody of any sense predicted it would, we are doomed to die horrible deaths in five minutes. Looking back on the year or years of education in that final retrospective flash, would I say to myself, "Damn it all, I did all that preparation for a future that will now not come. All that career building—and no more career! I wish I had spent my time on this or that other more valuable or pleasurable activity"? Or would I, and would my students, be tempted to say something like, "Well, if I had known what I now know—Oh, oh! There goes the first blast, off above Evanston—I would have spent these last years, these last months, this last week, just as I have done, on that most distinctively human of all human activities, learning how to learn"?

PART IV · *TO HIMSELF—AND TO THOSE HE TRIES TO TEACH*

A TEACHER'S JOURNAL, 1972–1988

One [of my students] was T. S. Eliot, who subsequently wrote a poem about it, called "Mr. Appolinax." . . . He was extraordinarily silent, and only once made a remark which struck me. I was praising Heraclitus, and he observed: "Yes, he always remind me of Villon." I thought this remark so good that I always wishe[d] he would make another.

Bertrand Russell

Oh, Mr. Booth, it's so good working with you—you must have had to learn things the hard way!

Student at Earlham College, after a grueling two-hour private conferenc[e] on how to write an essay