

# 9 Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard: Reflections on the Inability to Write

**Peter Elbow**

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

**W**hat got me interested in writing was being unable to write. First at Oxford, then at Harvard. First, I will tell the story straight—as I experienced it—and see what we can learn. But I've rethought this story—reexperienced it really—and now I also want to go on to *retell* it, crooked perhaps, and draw more reflections. But this is not just an exercise in story telling; I will be working for insights about writing, teaching, and learning. In the end, I'll have two versions of the story and five ruminations. Thus my structure is a kind of collage—a collage in which I am also trying to show that there need be no conflict between academic writing and personal writing.

## **First Version**

I enjoyed writing in the last few years of school. Because my older sister and brother left home for college and I was lonely by myself, because I wanted to ski and was stuck in New Jersey, and because my grandmother had left money for our education, I went away to boarding school for three years. Proctor Academy was then an undistinguished school in New Hampshire. My English teacher, Bob Fisher, was just beginning his career as a teacher. He was excited about reading and writing and learning, and he had us writing about Dostoevsky and truth and the meaning of life—and writing fairy tales too. I loved writing and I decided I wanted to become a high school English teacher like him.

In college, my experience of writing was the experience of being knocked down, but then stubbornly picking myself up, dusting myself off, and finally succeeding. On my third essay for freshman English, my teacher wrote, "Mr. Elbow, you continue your far from headlong rise upward"—and the grade was D. The teachers I met in 1953 at Williams College were sophisticated and I was naive. But I was eager to do well and I worked hard at it—and by the end of my first year had begun to do so. Indeed, I gradually found myself wanting to enter their world and be like them—a college professor, not just a teacher. I wanted to be a learned, ironic, tweedy, pipe-smoking, professor of literature.

As for writing, I took no particular pleasure in it. I wrote when assigned. I no longer experienced any imaginative element in the writing I did; it was all critical. I found it difficult, but I sometimes got excited working out a train of thought of my own. Toward the end of my four years, however, I began to notice out of the corner of my consciousness, an increase in the "ordeal" dimension of writing papers: more all-nighters; more of them the night *after* the paper was due; more not-quite-acknowledged fear. But still I got those As.

And with them, a scholarship from Williams to go to Oxford. I wish I'd been as smart as my predecessor from Williams, Price Zimmerman: smart enough to study a *different* subject at Oxford from what I planned to study in graduate school. But I was too earnest and chose English.

My Oxford tutor was another teacher in his first year of teaching: Jonathon Wordsworth, the grand nephew of the poet. My experience with him was, in a way, like the one I had at college, but more so. He played harder. Again I was knocked down—but it felt like I was knocked out and when I gradually staggered to my feet, the grogginess wouldn't go away. I thought I'd become sophisticated and critical at college, but this experience showed me I was still the same old tender, naive boy who wanted to be liked and praised. I thought I'd learned a lot about irony from my college professors, but Jonathan brewed a tougher English strain. (Interesting that I eventually wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on double and triple irony and the relinquishing of irony in Chaucer. )

Tutorials were conducted in the tutor's rooms. Once a week, I'd knock on the oak door and come in and read my essay to him, and be instructed, and then at the end he'd say something like, "Why don't you go off and read Dryden and write me something interesting." My first essay was on Chaucer and he was pretty condescendingly devastating. ("What are we going to do with these Americans they send us?" Interesting again that Chaucer was my Ph.D. topic.) During one tutorial, he cleaned his rifle as I read my essay to him. On another occasion I quoted Marvell. As I pronounced the title of the poem in my broad-vowelled American accent, "On a Drohp of Doo," he broke in with his clipped Oxford accent, "On a Drup of Djyew," and remarked, "Maybe that's why you don't understand poetry, Elbow. You don't know what it sounds like." Before the end of the fall term, I was coming in every week saying, "I don't have an essay for you. I tried as hard as I could, but I couldn't write it." And I really had tried hard, spending the whole week writing initial sentences, paragraphs, and pages and throwing them all away.

Eventually, I changed tutors and limped through my second year. I took a lot of Valium as exams approached. For in fact, it turned out that the Oxford degree didn't depend at all on any of these essays written for tutors over two years. They were nothing but practice for the nine three-hour exams you took during your last four-and-a-half days. I was terrified, but it turns out that the exams didn't throw me as much as the essays had done: in each exam there were only three hours for at least three essays and there wasn't time to agonize—even to revise. I survived with acceptable results (an "undistinguished second")—and very grateful too. "Pretty much what we expected," was Jonathan's comment on the card on which he mailed me my results.

With all that education, you'd think I'd have learned a few simple things—for instance that I needed a break from school. And in fact, I spent the last weeks in August looking for a teaching job in schools. But none turned up and, ever earnest, I started on my Ph.D. in English at Harvard. I still wanted to become a professor, and people kept telling me to "just get the degree out of the way"—like having a tooth pulled or an injection before going on a trip. But, of course, in our American system, the graduate seminar papers count for everything. I had a terrible time getting my first semester papers written at all, and they were graded unsatisfactory. I could have stayed if I'd done well the next semester, but after only a few weeks I could see things were getting worse rather than better. I quit before being kicked out.

My sense of failure was total. It wouldn't have been so bad if I had been less invested or hadn't tried so hard. But I'd long announced my career commitment to my family and relatives, my friends, and my teachers—and I'd tried my damndest. I'd defined and staked my identity on this business of getting a Ph.D. to become a college professor. And I'd also defined myself—to others and to myself—as "successful," particularly at school. So when I quit, I felt ruined. I felt I never wanted to have anything to do with the world of books and teaching again.

### **First Reflection: On the Experience of Failure**

I realize now that much of the texture of my academic career has been based in an oddly positive way on this experience of complete shame and failure. In the end, failing led me to have the following powerful but tacit feeling: "There's nothing else they can do to me. They can't make me feel any worse than they've already done. I tried as hard as I could to be the way they wanted me to be, and

I couldn't do it. I really wanted to be good, and I was bad." These feelings created an oddly solid grounding for my future conduct in the academic world. They made it easier for me to take my own path and say whatever I wanted.

In subsequent years, I've noticed that lots of people's behavior in schools and colleges is driven by the opposite feelings—sometimes unconscious: "Uh-oh. They could really hurt me. I *must* do this or I'll fail. I *couldn't* say that or they'd kick me out. To fail or be kicked out is unthinkable." When you live with these feelings—as I had certainly done through all the years before I failed—you sometimes notice a faint impulse to say or do something unacceptable (for example, to skip an assignment, or to do it in a way that the teacher would find unacceptable, or to stand up to the teacher with some kind of basic disagreement or refusal). But you scarcely notice this impulse because acting on it would be unimaginable; insupportable. I realize now that the most unsuccessful students are often the most adventuresome or brave or mentally creative. They operate from the feeling of, "They can't hurt me any worse. What the hell!" That feeling can be empowering. In truth, the most successful students are often the most timid and fearful. They have the most at stake in getting approval. They do the most cheating in school; they have the most suicides.

### **On with the First Story**

Do I seem to celebrate failure here? Am I sounding smug? ("Look at me. They couldn't kill me.") Am I implying a kind of tough-guy Darwinism? ("It's good to fail students; it toughens 'em up.") I don't mean that. I went back and succeeded because I was stubborn and hungry, yes, but I probably wouldn't have been able to overcome my experience of failure without a foundation of privilege (good schools and lots of support I could take for granted) and *luck*. And in fact, it was the old-boy network that got me into the academic pond again by way of a job I never would have sought: an instructorship at M.I.T. They needed bodies in the middle of July because of a departmental feud and a bunch of resignations—and an old college teacher of mine was doing the hiring. (And instructorships were much easier to get in 1960 than they are now.)

I was terrified to take this job, but I needed work. I stayed scared as I started teaching Homer, Aeschylus, Thucydides, and Plato with these M.I.T. first-year students, but I gradually woke up to the fact that I was having a good time. I gradually realized that teaching was much more fun than being a student. I *liked* to read and talk about books when it wasn't for the sake of taking tests or writing papers. I loved the change of agenda that teaching brings. No longer, "Do I understand well enough for *them*?" but rather, "Can I find something to do with this book that students will find worthwhile?" No longer, "Do I love this book enough and in the right way?" but rather, "We're stuck with this book; how can we make it useful in our lives?"

### **Second Reflection**

Since that time in my life, I've often reflected on a curious fact: If you can't write, you can't be a student. But the inability to write doesn't get in the way of teaching at all. Of course, I couldn't have gotten tenure without writing, but my teaching went well. I was an excited teacher and learner. If I'd taught in the schools or at some college, like Evergreen, that doesn't require publication, no one would have ever thought to define my nonwriting as a problem.

I don't know what to make of this asymmetry between being a student and a teacher. On the one hand, I think it's dumb to require people to publish if they want to teach—at least as publication is presently defined. On the other hand, it's sad to define teachers as people who read, not as people who write. (This asymmetry between being a student and a teacher recalls another one: Teachers can't teach without students, but students can learn perfectly well without teachers.)

## Finishing the First Story

After three years at M.I.T., I joined the founding faculty at Franconia College, an experimental college in New Hampshire. This was 1963. My three years at M.I.T. gave me more college teaching experience than anyone else on the faculty—all five of us. My M.I.T. years had been, in a sense, about the rehabilitation of reading for me. These next two years at Franconia were the beginnings of a rehabilitation of writing. For I discovered that I enjoyed writing when I was no longer writing as a student. It was no longer, "Here is my writing. Is it acceptable?" Now it was, "I have some ideas about Socrates that excite me and I think I can make them useful to you in your teaching." I remember writing into the night—long memos on purple dittos—writing out of an excited connection with the material and with my colleagues, who were all teaching the same course.

After this total of five years' teaching, I was hit with two strong reasons to re-enter graduate school. First, it looked as though Franconia might fold in its second year, and I found I couldn't get another job without a Ph.D. Second, my experience of moving from highly successful students at M.I.T. to highly unsuccessful students at Franconia convinced me that something was deeply wrong with how education worked. For it became clear to us that these students whom everyone defined as failures were very smart, and they did good work when given good learning conditions. I wanted to speak out about higher education, but I realized that unless I got a Ph.D., people would say, "You just don't like it because you couldn't do it."

My first impulse was to get my degree in psychology or education—the two subjects that really interested me at this point. But I discovered that I could get my degree much more quickly if I stuck with English. So I climbed up on the same horse I'd fallen off of five years earlier. I wasn't worried that I had no commitment to literature, indeed, I found it enormously enabling as a student to have a completely pragmatic motivation. Instead of worrying, "Am I committed enough to literature?" (a question I had worried about in my first go round), I felt, "I don't care whether I like it or it makes sense. I'll do whatever damn thing you ask. I just want a degree." Under the protection of this psychological umbrella, I gradually discovered how much I loved literature.

But I was worried. About writing. Would I get stuck again when I tried to do school writing? I was so scared that I set myself a personal deadline for every paper. I forced myself to have a full draft for myself a full week before every real deadline. No matter how bad the writing was, I had to produce the requisite number of pages that I could hold in my hand. Then I had a week to try to improve it. This regime forced me to do something I'd never been able to do before, namely, to write out sentences and paragraphs and pages I knew were no good, to write garbage, and to say, "What the hell." The key was my crassly pragmatic frame of mind.

In addition, I encouraged myself to write little notes to myself about what was happening as I wrote. In particular I wrote notes at stuck points ("How did I get into this swamp?"). And when I finally got my writing or thinking functioning again, I tried to remember to stop for a few moments to explore how I'd managed to do so. Often these were just scrawled notes on little scraps of paper, but I put them all in one folder. After I finally got myself employed again (back at M.I.T.), and I'd finished my dissertation on Chaucer (and even revised it for publication), I did what I'd been wanting to do for a couple of years: pull out that folder of notes to myself and see what I could figure out about writing. I knew there were ideas there that I wanted to figure out. This resulted in *Writing Without Teachers* in 1973. But it wasn't until I had written *Writing with Power* in 1981 that I would call writing "my field."

## Retelling the Central Story

A number of years after it happened, I began to think again about this story of my inability to write: not just because I was beginning to have a professional interest in the writing process, but also because my life was coming apart. My first marriage was breaking up. This difficulty led me to a lot of writing in a diary and talking in therapy. So, in fact, I didn't just *think about* my writing difficulty; in this writing and talking I would sometimes touch on these earlier events and feelings and begin in a sense to reexperience. I've always enjoyed watching cows and other ruminants with two stomachs chew their cud—somehow attracted to the idea of re-chewing one's food at leisure afterwards. That's what I started doing.

In my first chewing for my first stomach—that is, during my original experience of struggle and inability with writing—I experienced myself trying as hard as I could to do what I was supposed to do, but failing. In retrospect a number of years later, however—as this experience of struggle passed on to my second chewing for my second stomach—I gradually got hints of a different story. In my diary writing and talking therapy during this later period of struggle in my life, I began to get whiffs of an under-feeling: a feeling that maybe I didn't *really* want to give those teachers the papers they were asking for. Maybe I *didn't* want to be such an earnest, diligent, compliant student. What I originally experienced as an inability, I now began to sense as perhaps resistance; in fact, *refusal*.

I'd always been so obedient. I'd never been able to understand my friends who goofed off or didn't do what they were supposed to do. I'd always experienced myself as simply *wanting* to do what I was supposed to do. I never felt any gap between my duty and my desire. I suppose you'd say that in my formative years I'd badly wanted praise and affirmation and learned that school was a good place to get it. And I'd become skilled at it, become hooked on that role, if you wish. I was the paradigm good student—just what you'd want in your class. For I wasn't just a fawning yes-man; I engaged in sophisticated independent thinking of my own. After all, that's what my best teachers wanted and I wanted to do what they wanted me to do. But now I began to sense an underside to the story.

The essays I wrote in college were often ambitious and thoughtful, but they were almost always muddy and unclear. Teachers were always writing comments to me or telling me straight out: "Why don't you just *say* directly what you mean? Why do you wander and digress and beat around the bush so much? Why so tangled?" But I was struggling as hard as I could to say what I meant—to be clear. If they had described me to a third party, they probably would have said, "He's a smart kid, but when he writes he ties himself in knots." And tying myself in knots is literally what I was doing, according to this second hypothesis.

That is, in retrospect, I think I was playing a game with those teachers: they thought they were putting me to the test, but really I was putting them to the test—the following test: "I'm smart. I'm terrific. If you can understand my paper and see through my paper to how good I am, you pass the test. If you can't, you fail. It's my job to write the paper, but it's your job to recognize my brilliance." It strikes me now that maybe I didn't *want* my meaning to be so clear.

## Third Reflection: Language to Convey, Language to Disguise

There emerges here a curious and pregnant fact: that language can be used not only to convey meaning, but to disguise it. We characteristically articulate our meaning in words so people will understand us; but sometimes we do it so that they won't—or at least so some of them won't. This may seem perverse. And perverse is what I was being—"contrary" with my teachers. And I get mad when I feel others using language this way—such as when professionals and academics write not just to communicate their meaning, but to exclude the unwashed.

Yet this "game" of using language to convey-but-also-to-disguise was explicitly celebrated in medieval theology and criticism as a model for poetry. According to this theory, the

poem consists of a tough *husk* that hides and protects, and a sweet and tender *kernel* inside. (Petrarch cites Gregory and Augustine in saying that if it is appropriate for scriptural wisdom to be veiled, how much more appropriate for poetry [See Robertson 1963, 62ff].) The function of a good poem is to convey the kernel of wisdom or sweetness—but only to those worthy of it; and to hide it from the unworthy.

This wasn't just a theory spun by intellectuals and theoreticians. Christ proclaimed it openly in his parables—talking about his very use of parables, and from the Gospels, it became common currency. Here is Matthew's version:

Then the disciples went up to him and asked, "Why do you talk to them in parables?" "Because," he replied, "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven are revealed to you but they are not revealed to them. For anyone who has will be given more, and he will have more than enough; but from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away. The reason I talk to them in parables is that they look without seeing and listen without hearing or understanding." (Matthew 13:10–14, Jerusalem Bible)

He goes on to say this is the fulfillment of a passage in Isaiah (6:9–10).

This is a hard saying, but he makes it even harder in Mark 4:11–12. " 'The secret . . . is given to you, but to those who are outside everything comes in parables, so that they may see and see again, but not perceive; may hear and hear again, but not understand; otherwise they might be converted and be forgiven.' "

When Christ said that the rich will get richer and the poor poorer, he wasn't so much trying to preach Reagan economics (though he did seem to mean it in all its economic astringency). He was really using money as an analogy or metaphor for his main message—which was about the conveyance of meaning through language (see Kermode 1979, 33ff ). It's a disturbingly elitist point whether it's about money or meaning, but there is no denying an element of truthful empiricism too: The best way to make money is to have a fund of previously accumulated money to work with. (See Matthew 25:14ff for the passage where Christ bawls out people who don't invest their money to make more, but instead settle for mere saving—timidly "burying their talents.") And the best way to understand hard words or ideas is to have a fund of prior understanding or wisdom to build on.

We see this approach to conveying meaning in many mystical traditions. The master purposely makes something hard to understand so that learners have to go through the right process of *nonunderstanding* struggle to get it. Without that nonunderstanding and struggle, they won't "really" get it. A clear conveyance of the "mere meaning" leads to a kind of superficial cognitive understanding that, in fact, functions as a filter against the deeper understanding or full digestion we need. The common theme here is a purposeful use of language to conceal, not just to reveal.

Helen Fox (1994) points out that many traditional, non-Western cultures value this indirect, and often metaphorical, way of conveying meaning and scorn the modern Western value of being direct and literal. Here is an account by Deborah Fredo (1995) of the difference between traditional and modern ways of conveying knowledge in Senegal:

The [traditional] kind of knowledge that is sought after is that kind which can come from 'minds that bleed best' [the wisest minds]... [I]ndirect thought ... is more valued than direct thought because what can be attained through direct thought is said to be the kind of knowledge you don't have to work for, the kind that is given to you. Riddles are used as a kind of intelligence test to see if the mind is open enough to 'bleed.'

Being modern, on the other hand, is associated with being direct, a decidedly inferior attribute of the mind. Being true to traditional form means being able to speak in ways which require a listener to decode what you are saying and analyze your meaning. Making meaning, in such a process, always involves some inquiry and analysis but it is

the qualities of the person seeking to understand meaning or knowledge that guarantee its acquisition. (66-67)

This approach to language and learning can't be too crazy or we teachers wouldn't use it so much. For we often give the best and the fullest explanations of things to students who already understand a lot—and give far less to students who don't understand.

So even though I resent this use of language (which I now think I engaged in with my college teachers) and dislike this parable about parables, I must recognize that language-to-convey-and-to-disguise is not only a venerable tradition but a perennial human impulse. It lies behind much spontaneous and unsophisticated word play. And isn't much, or even most, poetry an attempt, in a way, to slow down comprehension? (The poet Richard Hugo famously remarked, "If I wanted to communicate, I'd pick up the telephone.") Almost everyone loves riddles, which are a central art form in most oral cultures. In short, humans naturally use language to make their meaning more clear and striking; but they also like to use language to make their meaning *less* clear—to use language as a kind of filter or puzzle or game to distinguish among receivers.

So, although I'm not wanting to defend the tangled quality of those old papers of mine, it strikes me that perhaps we shouldn't be so single-minded in our pursuit of clarity. Perhaps Richard Lanham and Winston Weathers are right in resisting the assumption that good writing always means clear writing. Perhaps students would write better and learn quicker if we were more appreciative of their impulse to write things that we *don't* understand.

### **Back to the Story**

This test I was putting my teachers to—this game I was playing with language: I sense it wasn't just an arrogant game, but an angry one. I think I was mad because they weren't willing to try to build my education on who I was. They felt that the only way to educate me was to strip me down; get rid of all my naivete and wrong feelings. *Learning* wasn't enough for them; I had to be made to *unlearn* and then be built up from scratch. They wouldn't accept or respect me unless I stopped being the kind of person I was. I seem to be implying that I was blaming them—and the taste in my second stomach *is* the taste of anger and blame. Yet, there was no taste of blame at the time, and they would be astonished to hear any talk of blame because I so deeply *wanted* to be like them. Perhaps that's why I was mad—and I guess I still am: it wasn't just my behavior that was dancing on their strings, but my very desires.

In knocking on my tutor's door week after week with *no* paper at all, I was being a tacit refuser, an objector. I didn't experience myself as mad at those Williams College teachers (even though I now suspect anger might have been lurking hidden); I kept giving them their papers. But I *knew* I was mad at Jonathan. Still, I couldn't openly refuse. My inability to write was the closest I could come to giving him the finger. I hid my refusal not only from him, but from myself. Thus, I experienced myself as weak and helpless and trying as hard as I could to be compliant—but now I suspect I was actually angry and stubborn and (in a sense) shrewd. (See Alice Miller on the anger of the "good child.")

#### **Fourth Reflection: Being Wrong about One's Own Feelings?**

Of course all this is just hypothesis. I started by telling events; then I told feelings I was having; and now I'm suggesting that I was having different feelings from what I thought I was feeling. One of my published essays ("The Pedagogy of the Bamboozled") is about how I loved these college teachers that I am now saying I was mad at; how I wanted to be like them; and how falling in love with teachers is such an efficient way to learn because it solves all motivation problems. It seems a kind of absurdity to say, "I thought I was feeling X, but really I was feeling Y." What else does the concept *feeling* mean, after all, but "what we are feeling"? Yet there is this perplexing and troublesome fact: we can be mistaken about our own feelings.

"So what else is new?" the sophisticates will answer: "You've never heard of Freud and the unconscious? And how he was only reminding us of what every nursemaid and mother knows."

Yet surely, we must allow people to be the final authority for what they are feeling. I certainly get mad when a psychoanalyst tries to tell me what *I really* feel, or a Marxist tells me I have "false consciousness"—just as mad as the toddler whose mother brushes aside what he just said with, "Oooh, poor dear. You're just tired [or hungry or wet]." When my son wanted to drop the cello because he said he hated practicing, I made no headway at all by saying, "No you don't. You actually like it. When you practice, I hear enthusiastic verve and cheerful singing." Lots of luck, Dad. But the troublesome fact is, we *can* be wrong about our feelings.

What if a wise and deeply trusted friend had come to me back then and said, "Peter, do you think maybe you don't *want* to give them those essays?" Would I have gotten an inkling of those feelings I wasn't feeling? Who knows? Or did I need some play therapy, perhaps with clay? It might have saved a lot of pain if (the Reagans are everywhere) I'd just said no.

#### **Fifth Reflection: Writing as Giving In**

My story seems to be about the movement from compliance to resistance. As a good student I had been expert at compliance, at doing what my teachers wanted me to do, but too much compliance got me in trouble. I was so unable to notice or experience any resistance or refusal or anger—so mistaken about my feelings, so unable to find a path for these feelings—that they found their own underground path to short circuit my entire ability to write or even be a student. My story seems to be about the need to learn fruitful or healthy ways to resist rather than ways that undermine oneself.

This is a familiar theme in studies of the learning process (see, for example, Brooke, Felman, Fox, Jonsberg, Lu, Street, Tobin *Writing Relationships*). These commentators emphasize not only how learning leads inevitably to resistance, but also that we can't learn well without resistance. It seems clear that an important goal for teachers is to help students find fruitful or healthy ways to resist. This became my theme too in most of my subsequent writing about writing: I have been a celebrator of writing without teachers, writing that is free, writing that ignores audience.

But at this stage in my autobiographical reflections, I'm noticing something different in the story. Yes, it's about ineffective resistance, but now I'm struck with how it's also about ineffective compliance. When I couldn't write my papers at all, I may not have been resisting very effectively, but I certainly was resisting. What I wasn't doing at all was complying. During the earlier stages of writing this paper, I was noticing my gift for compliance; now I'm noticing my *problem* with compliance. Something tugs at me now to learn more about this side of the authority relationship of a student to a teacher.

Once I open this door, I'm struck at how many ways writing involves complying or giving in. The need for compliance is most obvious in the case of writing in school and college. There is always a teacher and an assignment and criteria to be met. Someone other than the writer is in charge. The writing has to conform to the teacher's criteria or it's not acceptable (Cleary gives us good pictures of this in her interviews with students). But even when scholars write for learned journals, there is often a strong sense of the need to conform to someone else's criteria. The

constraints can be even stronger with a supervisor or employer—sometimes, in fact, the obligation to say exactly what the person in charge wants you to say. Thus in many, or even most, writing situations, there is a subtle, or not so subtle, pressure to give in. When we send writing to journals, publishers, and teachers, what is the verb we use? We "submit."

But now I've come to see in writing for *any* audience a subtle but powerful requirement to give in. Babies and toddlers get to say things however they want, to speak the words and ideas as they come—and parents feel it is their job as audience to interpret no matter how garbled the language. But when we write, we can't be like babies and toddlers. That is, in the very act of writing itself—at least if we want to be understood—we have to give in to the code or the conventions. The conventions. To write is to be conventional.

Look at writers who resist the conventions and refuse to give in. There has always been a small but powerful tradition of writers who feel that accepting conventions means losing their integrity. The most obvious cases are avant garde writers who violate the conventions of meaning, structure, syntax, and orthography: Emily Dickinson, James Joyce, and William Blake are now-hallowed examples. To notice the dimension of resistance in their writing—or in the writing of more recent avant garde writers—helps us notice the unspoken but inherent pressure to comply that they are reacting against. Such writers write the way they want or the way they think best; they push aside the needs of readers. They may lose readers, yet a few are so skilled as to win wide readership. James Joyce managed to persuade readers to do the interpretive work that we usually only do for our own children. (He allegedly said that the only thing he wanted from readers was for them to devote their lives to trying to understand his words—what every baby and toddler simply deserves, but a writer has to earn.) French feminists like Kristeva directly link the conventions of language and writing with the oppressive structures of society and culture (the "law of the fathers").

This pressure from writing to make us give in shows itself in a humble but naked way if we consider the process of copy-editing. Good copy-editing is difficult for all of us who are not real editors, and especially for many students, but I'm not talking about ability, I'm talking about compliance. What interests me here is the common phenomenon of people *not* copy-editing—or copy-editing much less than they are capable of. Copy-editing is such a drudgery; we are never done; we always miss mistakes that we *could* find if we just went through it one more time or read it out loud. Is there not a universal tendency to feel, at some level, "I want you to accept my writing just the way it is—just the way I put it down. I don't want to have to exert myself to clean it up just to make it easy for you." (I found an embarrassing number of surface mistakes in a previous draft of this paper that I had, in fact, shared with friends and colleagues.) I now think that a lot of the mistakes we see in student writing are really the result of a reluctance or even a refusal to change their "natural product." "Take me as I am!" If our only hypothesis for bad copy-editing is laziness, we are forgetting to notice an interesting flavor behind the laziness.

We can also notice the pressure to give in if we notice the release from that pressure when we *don't* have to give in—that is, when we write completely privately, perhaps in a diary or in freewriting. Or we notice this release *if* we can permit it—if we can allow ourselves to turn off that pressure from conventions and readers that most of us have internalized. It's not so easy. I've become pretty good at it, yet sometimes I find myself fixing the spelling of words I've written down, even when I know this is a throwaway draft that no one will read—even when it is just a venting that I won't even read *myself*. (Haswell 1991 studied freewriting and was struck at how *obedient* to conventions it tends to be.) But those who can put aside the pressure to comply almost invariably experience a significant relief.

The very act of *giving* itself exerts a pressure to give in. We smile at the child who gives his mother a bag of gummy candy for her birthday. Gradually, we learn that we're supposed to figure out what the recipient would like—not what we would like.

Am I being one-sided here and neglecting the importance of resistance? I don't want to do that. After all, perhaps it was my resistance in quitting school (odd as it was—being experienced as shameful failure rather than as resistance) that eventually allowed me to comply. But if I make this case for resistance, I am also acknowledging that the function of the resistance was to help me comply. The implication is that students need resistance for the sake of healthy learning because learning so deeply requires giving in. Even if there is no healthy learning or writing without resistance, the fact remains that there is *no learning or writing at all* without a crucial element of compliance or giving in.

It's a little frightening to stick up for compliance. Compliance is what repressive schools and teachers have been emphasizing all along: "What kids need to learn is how to go along, to follow directions, to give in, to obey!" My reflex is the opposite: "What kids need to learn is how to resist and maintain their autonomy." But it's not an either/or matter. It *feels* either/or because that's how we tend to experience it: "Will I fight the dirty bastards or cave in?" But we need *both* resistance and compliance. Nothing I say about the importance of compliance diminishes the need also for resistance: we clearly need resistance if we want to do our own thinking and be our own person—to go against the grain, to hang on to our autonomy, integrity, agency.

In short, we have fetched up against a familiar binary pattern—an opposition between necessary but conflicting elements. I think this pattern helps us understand better the complexities of the teaching and learning process—helps us look at the rich variety of students' strengths and weaknesses around us and notice the spectrum of methods students have developed to deal with this conflict between the inherent need in learning both to resist and also to give in. Some methods are more successful than others, but none feel very comfortable or ideal, for in the last analysis the two needs are—though necessary and complementary and perhaps even potentially reinforcing—nevertheless, at odds with each other.

- At one extreme are the compliant students. I was expert at compliance; I wanted to do what my teachers wanted me to do. There is a long tradition of learning by imitation and copying. Probably the most psychically efficient way to learn a lot is to fall in love with your teachers—as I tended to do (see my "Bamboozled," p. 96–98). Many feminists see girls as traditionally socialized to comply. Girls and women seem to go along more with teachers—to give less back-talk or other kinds of resistance. (See, for example, Gilligan; see Bolker on the "patient Griselda" syndrome in writing. It's worth noting that the word *buxom* originally meant obedient.)
- At the other extreme are the highly resistant students. They fight and sabotage the teacher, they sometimes walk out, and the only thing they give is the finger. Boys and men seem to fall more often into this relation to teacher authority than women do (see Connors; Tobin's "Car Wrecks"). We don't have to be essentialists to see that women often have a harder time with resistance and men have a harder time with compliance. But this is slippery ground: there are plenty of women who resist and plenty of men like me who seem to love doing what their teachers want them to do (not to mention the complexities of complying-but-not-really-complying and resisting-but-not-really-resisting).
- In between these two extremes we can look for the various ways that students try to serve *both* goals—to negotiate the competing pressures to give in and to resist. Some make a compromise and are sort of resistant and sort of compliant. These are not the excellent students, but rather the middling or passable or mediocre ones. You can't do a very good job if you only sort of go along with the assignment and conventions and needs of readers—and only sort of fight your way to your own thoughts and point of view.
- True excellence is rare because it consists of something paradoxical and hard to explain: the ability to be *extremely* assertive or even resistant while at the same time managing to comply *very well* with the requirements of conventions, teachers, assignments, and readers. David Bartholomae points to this paradox in saying that a writer learns "by learning to write *within* and *against* the powerful writing that precedes him, that haunts him, and that threatens to engulf

him" (1985, "Against" 27, emphasis added). In writing an essay about his own writing process, he emphasizes resistance and titles it "Against the Grain." And yet, he emphasizes how important it was for him not just to be influenced by strong teachers and writers, but in fact to imitate them and even to *copy over by hand* extended passages of their writing.

- And then there is dysfunction. That is, some students feel these conflicting pressures to comply and to resist so strongly that they get tied up in knots and can't write. (Perhaps this is what stopped me when I had to quit graduate school.) Or they struggle but don't turn out much or any work—or it's very bad and they feel terrible about it.<sup>1</sup>

Surely these competing needs to comply and to resist are not just school issues but rather play out in many areas of life—especially in growing up. What I'm exploring here is related to the Piagetian concepts of assimilation and accommodation. I wonder whether eating disorders might not sometimes be about the dilemma of giving in and refusing.

What follows for us as teachers from this way of looking at writing and learning? For one thing, we might look with new eyes at the unclear writing we get. We might consider the possibility that some of it—perhaps much of it—represents not so much a lack of skill as a way of resisting us as readers and wielders of authority. Much of the tangled quality of my writing in college was really a disguised form of resistance and resentment. Instruction in syntax and organization did me very little good. I had good teachers, they worked hard, and so did I. And still my prose stayed tangled. The problem was that I didn't fully *want* to give those teachers my meaning. My syntax never got clearer until I was finally wholehearted in my desire to *give* myself and my meaning to my readers. Sadly enough, this never happened until I stopped writing for teachers.

This way of looking at unclear student writing doesn't make it clear. But it helps me say to myself, "Maybe lack of skill is not the main problem here; maybe he or she doesn't really *want* to be clear to me. Maybe this is part of the 'writing process' considered from a wider angle." That doesn't make me want to reward unclear writing when it's supposed to be clear, but it does help me say, "this is very unclear to me" with better grace, more charity—and less discouragement. I find I can sometimes look *through* that unclear writing to unused capacities for clarity and force. Most of all, it helps me ask myself, "Am I giving my students enough occasions where the writing can be as unclear or problematic as can be?"

I think my teaching benefits when I recognize that I am faced with conflicting goals: helping students find ways to comply, yet still maintain their independence and autonomy; and ways to resist, yet still be productive. We can't remove the conflict, but we can at least understand it. Thus, I believe it helps our teaching to realize that it is possible ideally for resistance and compliance somehow to reinforce each other. Resistance gives us our own thinking and the ownership over ourselves that permit us to do the giving in we need for learning; compliance fuels resistance and gives us the skills we need for better resistance.

But I believe we should also recognize how difficult and paradoxical this trick is—how neither we, nor our students, can expect to pull it off consistently. We can acknowledge that students are, in fact, doing very well if they manage to careen back and forth a bit between complying and resisting—and not stay stuck in one mode. (I make a similar analysis of the dialectical relationship in the writing process between generating and criticizing, being credulous and skeptical [see my *Power*].)

Finally, I want to suggest some concrete teaching practices that have become even more important to me because they seem to help with this paradox about resistance and compliance. The main thing is the helpful contrast between high-stakes and low-stakes assignments. High-stakes assignments foster compliance: When we raise the amount of credit that an essay carries, we raise the pressure on students to comply. Low-stakes assignments allow more space for resistance or rebellion: When we assign work but structure it so it doesn't count for so much, we make it easier for students to resist or refuse—for example, by writing what they know we hate, or writing in a way that we hate.

But now I want to complicate this picture somewhat. In particular, I'm struck with how low-stakes writing helps with compliance too—not just resistance:

- *Private writing.* Look at the interesting mixture of occasions for compliance and resistance. When I assign private journal writing I am asking for a certain minimum but real compliance with the demands of the teacher: to produce writing at a certain time or lose credit. But since neither I nor any other outside reader sees it, there is no need to comply in any other respect. The writing doesn't have to conform to *any* criteria. I just ask students to flip the pages for me. Thus students can even cheat on this if they want to badly enough. When we do private writing in class, a few students sometimes just sit there not writing. I used to try to pressure them in some way, but it's hard when I won't even see it. Now I don't fight them—seeing it as an important occasion for saying no—as long as they don't disrupt others.
- What I hadn't figured out until now is that private writing doesn't just make it easier for students to resist by making it easier for them to give the finger to conventions or standards or my preferences, it also makes it easier for them to comply. Students can decide to *give in* without anyone seeing it—without a shred of teacher-pleasing or caving in to institutional pressure.
- *Writing merely to share.* I assign a good amount of writing that I ask students only share with each other—no feedback, and which I read but do not respond to or grade. Because this writing is shared, most students feel more pressure from audience and conventions than they do with private writing. But because there is no response to or grading of this writing, students are freer to resist any of these quiet but perhaps powerful pressures, and to frustrate or even annoy readers with no explicit penalty.
- But here too I am now realizing the low stakes that come from mere-sharing-no-response can help with compliance too—not just resistance. It's sometimes easier to comply with conventions or readers' desires when one doesn't have to comply.
- We see this same dynamic with the *extensive publication of student writing.* (At UMass Amherst, every teacher in the first year course publishes a class magazine four or five times a semester—paid for with a ten dollar lab fee.) Students can thumb their nose at readers; or go along with reader needs. The fact of publication—seeing all your classmates holding in their hands a copy of a class magazine that contains your writing—increases the pressure from peer readers. But by the same token, it helps put teacher standards into more perspective. It helps students think a bit more explicitly about the question, "Are the teacher standards the ones I really care most about?"
- *A grading contract.* I now tend to use a contract for grading. I promise students a B if they comply with an extensive set of requirements. (e.g., they must have consistent attendance, take major assignments through two genuine revisions, copyedit final drafts well, give and receive thoughtful feedback from each other, write process notes for every main assignment, keep a journal, and so forth. Sometimes I have additional clauses for an A, see my "Grading.") A contract shakes up the normal resistance/compliance dynamic of the writing classroom—or rather clarifies it. The contract makes the pressure to comply more concrete and explicit: my "demand" that they "do what I want them to do" is more naked than with conventional grading. This in itself is a relief—compared to the indirectness of conventional grading. But what is perhaps more important is how the contract asks for things that are so clear and external—rather than things that are a matter of quality and interpretation. My request for compliance is not an attempt to reach inside their head—or to get them to fit themselves into what's inside my head. It's not that I've given up trying to affect the insides of their heads—their standards or desires. For, of course, I often give them extensive feedback on their writing—often giving my reactions and values. But, in fact, I think I can have a bigger effect on my students with the contract than with conventional grading by letting my reactions be personal and insulating them from having any effect on the grade. Thus the contract makes it easier for students to resist; even on major assignments they can write what they know I will hate or write in a style

they know I don't like—with no penalty. But in the end, I think the contract makes it easier to comply because they don't have to. They are not caving in; they have more choice.<sup>2</sup>

If writing is an act of giving in, it seems to me that one of the most practical goals for us as teachers is to help students fall in love with their own ideas and their writing. Then they are stuck with the compliance problem in a productive way instead of a destructive way. Yes, they still have to give in to conventions and to audience—that's hard and it can hurt—but it is easier to put the resentment to one side and get yourself to give in because you love what you've created and you want others to get it, understand it, and appreciate it. It helps if *we* also love what our students write (see my "Ranking, Judging, and Liking"). The trouble with most school writing is that students have to comply not only to the conventions of written language, good thinking, and reader needs; they usually feel most strongly of all the need to comply with the teacher, the assignment, and the authority of the institution. This raises the stakes of compliance and makes it harder to give in. For students in this situation, giving in carries a higher price.

I've been describing this difficulty from our point of view as teachers. But it's fruitful to reframe it from the students' blunt point of view: "How can I be a good student without 'sucking up' or being a 'brown-nose?'" (Anyone who resists a psychoanalytic view need only reflect on the ubiquity of these metaphors among students.) Sadly, for many students the dilemma seems impossible. But let's turn the question around and use it as a framework for structuring our teaching: How can *we* conduct our teaching to maximize the opportunities for students to be good without experiencing themselves as "teacher pleasers?" Again, it's not easy. We need new thinking and shrewd suggestions.

Researchers have begun to think about this general issue as it is faced by adult nonliterate and by students coming from a culture that identifies away from school: how to learn without giving up one's identity or one's culture. Researchers have begun to notice better the inevitable loss that goes along with any learning.<sup>3</sup>

Let me conclude with a brief thought about the relationship of my whole story with issues of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. I imagine someone reading what I have written here and 'muttering, "What a whiner! A privileged and successful white boy is making such a big drama out of his struggles with the system. Shit, man! It's *his* system."

What if I were a different color or culture or gender or class? How much harder I would find it to negotiate a fruitful and productive way to comply with a culture that I see as devaluing or even destroying my culture! Given who I am, perhaps I should just laugh at my struggles and brush off my resentments since they seem so minor in comparison.

Yet my struggles and resentments were real—and they may be instructive. There's something to be learned from seeing how a culture tries to prepare people in privileged institutions. When looking from the outside at the fit between me and these elite institutions, one is apt to notice how much I seemed to *belong* because of my comfortable mainstream background. But when looking from the inside—from the point of view of my experience at the time—what strikes me most is my completely opposite feeling: my sense that I *didn't* belong and didn't fit in at Williams, Oxford, or Harvard. But, perhaps more important, how badly I *wanted* to belong—how deeply undermining it felt not to be "right"—and thus how high a price I was willing to pay to get that precious feeling of belonging. In a genuine sense it was "my system"—but it seems as though the way my system functions (except perhaps for deeply secure people) is to make it feel as though it *isn't* my system unless I give up on part of what is central to me and go along with it. Perhaps this is how structures of power and elitism function.

It's true that Oxford and Harvard and other elite institutions are, in significant ways, more tolerant of resistance and idiosyncrasy than less elite schools are (at least for those students with unflappable confidence). But in other ways, elite institutions exact the *most* compliance and elicit the most "buying in." If we doubt that, we need only look at how such institutions react to the possibilities of significant change in the educational process—or look at their alumni magazines to see how much graduates have "bought in."

On the one hand, I was the *best* kind of student: just the kind you'd want in your classroom. But I was also the worst: a failure who couldn't do the work and quit and never wanted to have anything to do with books and learning again. My goal in this essay is to complicate our notions of best and worst student. Many of our "best" students may be paying too high a price in their compliance and preventing themselves from doing lasting good work—or complying but not complying and sabotaging themselves. And many of our "worst" students, our refuseniks, might potentially be some of our best, but they are in the same dilemma: we haven't managed to help them find fruitful or productive ways to comply.

## Notes

1. Edward White writes: "Those who have learned to succeed [on multiple choice tests] do so not by asking which answer is correct in the world or under various circumstances, but by choosing the one the *test makers* are likely to have chosen to fit the needs of the test. The multiple-choice test thus examines—along with its 'content'—the degree to which the student can adapt reality to the needs of authority. This indeed may be the reason that many such scores correlate well with success in college. The required submission to the world of that kind of test may also suggest reasons why minority groups score less well on these so-called 'objective' tests than they do on writing tests" (1995, 34-45).

2. Bruce Bashford of SUNY Stony Brook points out that many teachers learn to shape assignments in such a way that the emphasis is on the "demand encountered within the activity" itself, in the problem—rather than on the demand to conform to a teacher's authority. "[A] task can have an integrity of its own, can contain its own criteria of success—what John Dewey had in mind when he said the solution is in the problem" (correspondence 3/9/95). Related here is the recent growth of interest in public service activities in writing courses. Students aren't just writing for the teacher but for outside tasks and people.

3. Arlene Fingeret writes of how "Illiterate adults . . . identify a risk connected to learning to read and write"—a risk of having to "separate themselves from their communities" and social networks (1983, 144). She speaks of the "findings of other researchers that nonreading adults would like to know how to read but that they have been unwilling to tolerate the profoundly disrespectful environment of most educational programs" (1989, 13). Mary Savage speaks of the need to learn to *mourn* "for the way schools teach us how to separate the 'us' from the 'them'" (1990, 25); for "how the academy rearranged people and knowledge in hierarchies and isolated us in agonistic relations" (1990, 27); and for "students who disappeared and relationships which ended and families which became strained and distant" (1990, 36). These are all costs of giving in.

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