
1 “What rough beast . . . ?”

We need to reinvent English. No glib redefinition or timid reform effort will do.

Ben F. Nelms, “Reinventing English,” *English Journal* editorial (1994)

*And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming” (1921)

In June of 1978, I was at the end of my second year of teaching high school English. Our department head had called a meeting, leaving the agenda mysteriously blank. As we filed into the classroom, we were surprised to see desks drawn into a cosy circle. When the department head began to speak, it was in a carefully reassuring tone.

We knew something was up.

The head’s studied gentleness could mean only one thing: something really bad was about to happen and we had better brace ourselves. He told us about meetings he had been attending, workshops to which only a few chosen leaders had been invited. This small group had been introduced to some new ideas, he said, and it looked as if these ideas were going to make a difference to the way we were expected to do our jobs.

The room became very quiet.

He proceeded to tell us that it soon might not be good enough just to assign pieces of writing for students to take home, work on, and hand in. He talked about “prewriting,” about working with students during their drafting, and about something he called “personal” writing. He said we ought to begin thinking in terms of a writing “process.”

For teachers who have entered the profession only in the last decade or so, it must be difficult to appreciate what a thunderbolt had dropped upon us. Within a very few years—five, ten at the most—“the writing process” had become the hottest educational ticket in town, and English departments everywhere claimed to be doing something about it. In those early years, as one might expect, implementation of this new model of writing instruction sometimes seemed a bit wooden. Our provincial Ministry of Education declared that, to encourage a “process orientation,” student writing *had* to be kept in file folders; I remember the deepening sense of absurdity I felt at a meeting in which teachers earnestly debated whether to use single- or double-fold files, laminated or plain cardboard. At another meeting, charged with the task of pinning

down a “writing policy,” a teacher leading the session asked, “How many drafts do we think we should require for each Grade Ten piece of writing? Three? Five? I think five sounds good.” (I shuddered.) But all that was to come later. On that June afternoon in 1978, the next chapter of local educational history had not yet been written, and, to put it bluntly, we simply did not know what the head was talking about. As the newest teacher in the department, I hadn’t heard anything about this in my teacher training. The older faculty had behind them years of habitual practice in standing at the front of the class, leading discussions of literature and assigning essays. For all of us, this new thinking didn’t have any precedent in the discipline we had studied in university or in our own high school years.

Did we welcome with open arms this first hint of innovation? We did not. The department head’s picture of the future was cloudy, as early visions usually are. It seemed we were being told that what we had all been doing—practices that *were* the subject English, as far as we were concerned—was somehow wrong. Our professional future was going to look different, but the details weren’t yet available—only this nebulous shape that sounded unlike any “English” we had ever known. It was as if we had caught a glimpse of Yeats’s “rough beast” slouching toward Bethlehem and weren’t sure that we understood or wanted to see this new era waiting to be born. We left the meeting, as I recall, in somber and private moods. In the days that followed, one senior teacher muttered darkly about how many years she had remaining before retirement. Others reassured themselves that this wasn’t really anything new, or that it was just another bandwagon: this, too, would pass. They were, of course, wrong.

The anxiety that I and others felt then must now seem quaint. Those new approaches grew into some of the most valuable educational developments in recent times. Writing teachers moved several steps closer to observing and working with the complex processes of learners, and were challenged to think in fresh ways about actually *teaching* writing, not just assigning and grading it. In retrospect, it was a great liberation, and the beast turned out to be a butterfly escaping from its cocoon. At the time, however, there was only the dread of facing an uncertain future.

Something like that dread may be taking shape again. We hear warning rumbles when an Australian educational leader speculates about the disappearance of English as a subject (Boomer 1988, 102) and British writers offhandedly comment that “the days of English as an academic discipline are clearly numbered” (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 1994, 213). We catch a scent of the beast in America when Ben Nelms (1994), as editor of the *English Journal*, declares that we need to “reinvent En-

glish”; Nelms reminds us of the creation of the subject a century ago and raises the “frightening possibility that such a bold initiative [today] might mean the death of English as we know it” (105).

We should be skeptical of apocalyptic prophecies. In *Voltaire’s Bastards*, John Ralston Saul (1992) reminds us that one of the western world’s longstanding obsessions is our “uncontrollable desire to give ourselves the impression that we have made yet another fresh start. We are constantly declaring new ages” (40). The baby-boom generation has a particular fondness for the rhetoric of “reinvention” and “revolution”: we always seem just a slogan away from the next technological, cultural, or spiritual Age of Aquarius. Furthermore, major flips of the calendar have always sparked millennialist thinking, and as we approach the year 2000, it is no surprise to hear calls for renewal in many spheres mounting to a feverish chorus. For the sake of calm discussion, we do well to stay clear of revolutionary posturing. If you’re like me, you’re weary of entrenched battles between the “vanguard” and “rearguard” of our profession. Our understanding of life grows and changes, and it’s best to sit down and talk about the implications of those changes without spreading alarms about standing on the brink of a cataclysm.

What are the conditions of birth for this new “beast” that threatens to disturb our complacency? A number of factors have come together to make it hard for us to be sure we understand what our subject is all about. Even when we think we do understand, we can’t be sure our concepts are shared by the public, by administrators, or even by colleagues down the hall.

Many older models of English teaching have lost their persuasive power. The idea of passing on a cultural heritage has been shaken by attacks on the white, male, middle-class, Eurocentric narrowness of that tradition. The multicultural realities of English-speaking countries make it hard for us to hold up reverentially a model of culture that was designed in another age for purposes that no longer seem so commanding, including imperialistic and moralistic purposes. On the other hand, if many of us no longer have a taste for administering cultural medicine—or “ramming literature into kids’ heads,” as I heard one teacher boast—we are also uncomfortable with becoming mere technicians tuning students’ linguistic skills. A pure-and-narrow skills approach too readily accommodates the more shortsighted demands of the business world. Our own education inclines us to insist that there is more to language than decoding and encoding, spelling and punctuation. There is a life of the imagination, and that makes a difference to human beings, even if it is a difference not easily measured by standardized tests.

The idea of English studies as a vehicle for students' "personal growth" has won favor in the last few decades, but, as we will see in the next chapter, the "growth" model's focus on individuals as isolated atoms and its silence about the role of contexts makes it lag behind current thinking about the more complex nature of "personhood."

With these foundations quaking beneath our feet, where are we left? In reality, I suppose we grab hold of whatever supports we can find and then carry on. That, however, leaves us with unsure footing, hardly in a position to march with conviction. At worst, we may find ourselves once again in Yeats's "The Second Coming":

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Suspicion that that is an all-too-accurate description of the current state of English teaching—and unwillingness to accept that state—is the fuel that propels my thinking in the chapters that follow.

To help you understand what this book is about, I need to clarify what it is *not*. It is not a polemic for expanding the canon of school texts to include fairer representation of women and minorities. Others have made those arguments too eloquently for them to need repeating here, although in Chapter 3 I do press for a wider definition of appropriate program materials. You will notice that my examples of literature are almost always drawn from a tiny list of highly recognizable authors, with Shakespeare, Dickens, and Golding figuring prominently. You will also not find descriptions of the writing process or attacks on the teaching of grammar in isolation. My silence on those topics should not be misconstrued as indifference, but again, others have already cleared those paths, even if their leads have not always been followed as wisely as we might have wished.

Issues of evaluation, assessment, and computers in the classroom, so popular in the professional press and conference circuit, are largely (though not entirely) omitted on the grounds that those questions are logically a later step: we need first to reflect on our understanding of the central goals of our subject, and I have my hands full with that initial question.

Above all, this is not a book of "clever strategies for your Monday morning class." It does include many practical suggestions, but, at heart, the book is not a "bag of tricks." Rather it is an effort to think carefully about the direction of English teaching, to ask what this subject could and should be in the coming years.

Let us be frank about the problem this creates for you as reader and for me as writer. We high school teachers are known for our insistence on the immediately practical. Writers and editors for our professional journals have learned to be wary of speculation and philosophizing. Experienced workshop leaders know their presentations will be valued according to the number of usable tips they offer teachers. Our lives are busy, and facing several groups of twenty to thirty teenagers each day generates in us an urgent survival instinct that leaves little room for ethereal musings. It doesn't help that much theoretical work has been done by academics based in universities: most of us are deeply suspicious of “ivory tower” theorizing. Arthur Applebee's (1993) survey of high school English teachers in the United States found that over 70 percent of them report “little or no familiarity with contemporary literary theory” and most believe it wouldn't be relevant in any case (122). The very word “theory” probably has bad associations. Our own academic training often emphasized “practical criticism” or hands-on “textual analysis,” while pushing literary theory to the margins. Similarly, the most obviously useful part of our professional training was often practice teaching or the first year of actual classroom experience—not any course in the “theory of education.”

I am pulled in two directions. I have tried to respect my colleagues' understandable appetite for practical applications, and I do talk about lessons and assignments that have worked for me and that I have seen work for others. However, I also resist the urge to dwell primarily on strategies because that too often blinds us to the kind of overall vision that could make our work more meaningful. Some will say, “You can never get too many good lesson plans,” but I think you can, when that stockpiling interferes with synthesizing and clarifying a larger vision. We probably already suffer from too many strategies—an “excess of practice” (Morgan 1990b, 200)—and not enough thinking about foundations and directions—the “*whys* of practice” (Mayher 1990, 176). After all, when our students read a novel, we count their reading a failure if they remain glued to isolated details of plot and character and cannot step back to consider larger questions of theme and purpose. Surely, by analogy, we should value our own acts of professional stepping back and envisioning, seeing something beyond tomorrow's lesson.

There's no reason why that act of envisioning shouldn't be informed by current and useful research and theory. Accordingly, the picture of English teaching that emerges in this book isn't “original” in the sense that I made it up myself. Instead, I try to synthesize the most interesting, convincing, and useful ideas that have emerged in the last few

years. In doing so, I attempt to be honest about acknowledging my sources, although it can be hard to track down the initial creators of ideas that have worked their way into general circulation. If you follow up my references, you'll find interesting reading; at the same time, I have kept the "scholarly apparatus" as unobtrusive as possible. The concepts that earn a place in this book do so not for the sake of trendy name dropping or jargon juggling, but because they make sense to me in my daily encounters with real high school students.

The concepts make sense because they begin to answer my need to understand how the work of the English classroom might shape itself into something more than a grab-bag of ideas harvested from here and there. For most of us, our teaching has been formed by a few influential teachers from our own schooling, a handful of respected colleagues, readings from books or journals, and the push and pull of classroom realities. From all this, we assemble a practice that keeps us going, but which has not always been scrutinized for its assumptions or challenged for inconsistencies. We may claim to scorn theory, but the moment we begin teaching we enact our understanding—our theories—of what language and communication are all about and what kinds of reading, writing, and talking deserve student effort. Theory is there, although it may be either explicit or submerged, sensible or chaotic. In the research cited above, Arthur Applebee notes that many teachers mix New Critical methods of textual analysis (presumably learned in university English courses) with reader-response methods (gleaned from professional readings and workshops). These are not entirely compatible approaches. At best, this mix might be an "eclectic compromise" (122), but at its worst, Applebee fears, it results in "tensions and inconsistencies . . . rather than a coherent and integrated approach" (201–02).

There is one more thing that this book is not: it is not the "last word" on English teaching. With all the areas I have not attempted to tackle, it should be clear that I don't see this work as a definitive manifesto. Rather, it is the opening of a conversation that I hope my colleagues will join. Effective conversational gambits need to be brief and need to leave conceptual space for others to enter. I have spun a few threads that particularly interest me and that pull together into the shape of something new and exciting. There are more threads and a larger shape yet to materialize. In the end, it doesn't matter whether you accept the specific pattern that I weave, but it does matter that we engage in this *kind* of questioning. We must come to terms with defining the heart of our subject. If we fail to define—and live—that "heart," we leave a conceptual vacuum, and there are plenty of legislators and interest groups only

too willing to define it for us. If we are unhappy with the version of English implied by the latest standardized test or this morning’s editorial in a national newspaper, we are obliged to propose an alternative vision, and the best way to start is by making that vision absolutely clear to ourselves.
