"Myself Must I Remake": An Existentialist Philosophy of Composition

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In "An Acre of Grass," William Butler Yeats tells us that even as an aged and honored poet, he cannot stop writing, cannot rest on his reputation, because of his compulsion to find new identities for himself:

Grant me an old man’s frenzy,
Myself must I remake
Till I am Timon and Lear
Or that William Blake
Who beat upon the wall
Till Truth obeyed his call. (299)

The idea that writers remake themselves by writing strikes many students as strange and not particularly desirable. That they might change who they are by what they write, students are happy to see as nearly an impossibility. When I tell them they can, they look away, embarrassed by my old man’s frenzy.

I come to this position out of my conviction that writing is a generative act, that what it generates—at least what it is sometimes capable of generating—is new thinking in the mind of the writer which, in turn, can lead to new identities to present to readers. We think new thoughts and thus change who we are. Many of us, students and faculty alike, have a hard time with this concept because we often talk ourselves into the conventional—and common sense—view that writing follows thinking: the writer begins the process with something in his or her head. The act of writing is, first, discovering what is already there, and then getting it on the page; the act of revising is simply clearing away static that might interfere with communication. I want to suggest that, as a teaching strategy, we ought to see the writing process, in its more inspired moments at least, as a matter of inventing or creating something to say that wasn’t in our heads at all until it was coerced into being by the process itself. I believe, along with poet William Stafford, that "a writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them" (393). Thought of in this way, writing generates thinking at least as much as thinking generates writing. Writing isn’t so much something we do after all our exciting thinking takes place, but rather something that often makes our good thinking happen.
The conventional advice we give our students is that if they will look deeply enough inside themselves they will discover their meaning, the implication being that it's lurking down there somewhere waiting to be pulled from the depths. I suppose there's no objective and verifiable way of finally deciding whether when we write we really create *ex nihilo* or merely discover what is already in our subconscious. My argument here is that the way we talk about the process to our students, the metaphor we use to elicit their expression, is important. And the creation metaphor works better than the discovery metaphor. I think that asking students to create their meaning rather than to discover it both encourages them and forces on them a kind of responsibility for their expression that might otherwise be absent.

The problem with the discovery metaphor is that students who look inside themselves and see nothing worth discovering are too easily discouraged. They look at examples we give and feel that nothing so interesting ever happened to them. They go to the well and pull up a dry bucket. The "something in the writer's head" that they assume begins the process simply is not there, and neither they nor I have the time to wait for it to appear. The occasion is now—this semester, this week. In the days before I started looking to my own writing processes as a way of validating what I was saying in class, I would simply quote John Ciardi—"Anything significantly looked at is significant" (34)—and recommend a longer rope and send them back to the well, sometimes in tears, usually in despair, always feeling that they weren't measuring up, that they were different, inferior to all those interesting kids Ken Macrorie keeps showing us in his texts. And too often that guilt and despair were paralyzing; intellectually immobilized, such students would continue to procrastinate until they believed their only choices were to drop the class, plagiarize, or simply disappear.

I don't quote Ciardi anymore, even though I still believe what he said is true; it's just not very helpful to a student in the throes not of delivery but of conception. Now I suggest that instead of going to the well, students make it rain. I agree with them: "If you say there's nothing in your head worth putting on paper, I believe you. I feel that way myself about seventy-five percent of the time when I roll a sheet of paper into my typewriter. But if I waited until I thought I had something worth saying, I'd write hardly at all. So go sit down and write. It'll be pure crap. We can compare first drafts sometime and see whose is the crappiest. But that's all right. You're supposed to feel despair; you're supposed to know you don't have anything worth saying in your head. Write it anyway. Then you'll have something to revise."

My students think I'm crazy, but they are mildly encouraged. If their mentor sometimes begins writing with nothing in his head worth transferring to paper, then maybe they aren't so hopelessly deficient after all. Don't get me wrong. It's not just that I think what's in my head isn't worth utterance; when I get it on paper, I see that I am not being overly modest—
that it really isn't worth a damn. But I have at least made a start; I have at least something on the page to revise, to throw away or to add to. And it is the feeling of being totally disgusted with my own work that forces me to whittle and add and grunt and scowl and finally arrive at a meaning, one that I would not have recognized as my own before the process started because it was not in my head then. I haven't simply remembered what I had forgotten I knew; I've come to know something I hadn't known before.

I wouldn't argue that my process is universal, but I don't think it's unique either. Many of my students express a shock of recognition: that's what they do sometimes out of desperation, but they always thought they were doing it wrong. They always thought they needed a thesis before they started to write. For these students—and for me—writing is what Ann Berthoff calls the "making of meaning" (8). Such writing is what William E. Coles calls a "self-creating process" whereby students become "composers" of their own "reality" (1).

Passing along this view of writing to students is not only a way of encouraging them; I think it's also a way of pressuring them to be responsible for what they write. The discovery metaphor implies no sense of responsibility for what is discovered. Columbus did not create America; he merely discovered what was already here, and, hence, was not responsible for its nature. But creators, inventors, are responsible. The student who writes a dull paper because "that's just the way I am" is trying to avoid responsibility for dullness. We might ask, "Do you like yourself that way? You don't have to be a creator of dullness, you know. Or of ugly intolerance or of macho posturing or of whatever." Students who don't like who they are on the page should be encouraged to revise themselves, not because they will thereby become great or even good writers, but because they can be better writers if they don't feel compelled when they write to be what they think they are when they aren't writing. I don't mean that they should be encouraged to make up their past, to say things have happened when they have not. But I do mean that they should be encouraged to invent rather than discover their voices, their connections, and their meanings—not flippantly but with a seriousness that comes from realizing they are thus inventing their identities as writers. As Kurt Vonnegut says, "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (Introduction v). And as Walker Gibson told us twenty-two years ago, writing is performance in which we choose a voice, a personality that we project from the page, but "we have to live with the effects of our performance. The voices I choose are mine, my responsibility." (109).

These thoughts are a long-winded preamble to the idea reflected in my title: that when we create (rather than discover) our ideas, our connections, our voices through writing, we are defining ourselves existentially. The existentialist assertion that "existence precedes essence" means, as I understand it, that we have no essence at all, no inner core of being, until we have existed, until we have engaged in acts which then give us an essence.
Sartre says it this way in "Existentialism Is a Humanism": "There is no reality except in action.... Man is...nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is." Sartre does not believe that unfulfilled potential counts for much; it's what one does rather than what one might do that defines; thus, there "is no love apart from the deeds of love; no potentiality of love other than that which is manifested in loving" (300). So it is meaningless to the existentialist to say that an individual is essentially benevolent or essentially depraved or essentially anything else until that person has created himself or herself through existence. And I would add that just as lovers define themselves only by loving, so writers define themselves only by writing. The only reason we can call Thurber, say, a literary humorist, is that he's written some funny stuff. To say that somebody who has never written a funny line is, in essence, a literary humorist is to speak nonsense. As Gibson says, "Handsome is as handsome writes" (110).

This idea, however we might communicate it to our students, can help liberate them as writers and help them escape the chains of their own self-concepts, concepts which they probably believe are their writing essences: "It's a dull paper because that's the way I am."

It's time for some examples. Since my thoughts on writing grow out of my examination of my own writing process, let me offer myself. Several years ago, the student newspaper at my school ran an ad for a plagiarism mill in California. For two dollars or so, you could order a catalog of hundreds of papers which might meet typical undergraduate writing assignments. The ad infuriated me and I wrote an angry letter to the newspaper, full of self-righteous posturing and preaching. Clearly, the letter was an accurate statement of the way I felt, a mirror held up to what was going on inside my head. But I was appalled when I read it a couple of hours later. Did I really want to come off as an angry guardian of public morality? I did not like the identity I'd created (or discovered) there. So I put the letter in a drawer and revised it a semester later when the ad ran again. This time I sounded more like I wanted to sound: my real anger (which at first had led me to suggest a kind of censorship—and I meant it, god help me) was now leavened by some detachment and by what I thought was some wit. I argued that invitations to plagiarism are inappropriate in a publication by and for people involved in an educational enterprise, as inappropriate as, say, an ad in a police officer's journal for burglary tools, or an ad in a nutrition magazine for junk food, or (in the climactic position) an ad in L'Osservatore Romano (the official publication of the Vatican) for condoms. I was charmed by my own voice there, and while that has its dangers, I think I succeeded—forgive the immodesty—in creating an identity I took some pleasure in. But that identity was no more the real me than the identity in the earlier draft was. I had created it existentially through the act of revision.

Students can do that, too. For example, a student in one of my recent composition classes came across consistently, both in person and on
paper, as arrogant, contemptuous, defensive to the point of paranoia. (The easy analysis, of course, is to say that’s the way he is, so that’s the way he’ll write.) In a paper in which I asked the class to respond to Jerry Farber’s polemic, “The Student as Nigger” (in which Farber argues that schools and teachers have made Steppin Fetchits of students), Charlie accepted Farber’s formulation and looked forward to the day when, as a teacher himself, he could be the master and someone else the slave. The system didn’t offend him so long as he held the whip in hand. Later, he wrote what I and others in the class considered a blatantly racist account of his encounter with a black teacher, and he often assumed a sexist attitude towards women. But on an assignment toward the end of the semester, just after I had praised another student’s paper for its hint of self-mockery, for the way the narrator’s revealed weakness did not alienate readers but rather made them feel a sense of camaraderie that worked for the writer, Charlie’s voice changed completely. He wrote a paper about a misadventure in tearing down an old privy, taking some pains to point out how confident of success he’d been, then making himself, or at least his persona, the butt of the joke as the rotten two-by-four he was standing on gave way with picturesque and pungent result. When Charlie read the paper in class, the other students were quiet at first, then lavish in their praise. Several spoke to me later about how surprised they were that Charlie sounded like such a nice guy in the piece.

My point is not that Charlie’s real self came through in response to Farber and was disguised in the outhouse paper, hidden behind a more amiable voice. My point is that, as a writer, Charlie changed himself, and, further, that one identity is as real as the other insofar as any identity is real on the page. Charlie, in effect, saw the possibilities of changing himself from someone people didn’t like to someone they did, and for the “paper Charlie,” the change was real even if temporary. Certainly, I don’t mean that Charlie’s life had changed, that his whole existence was somehow altered. What was changed was what Coles calls “a literary self; not a mock or false self, but a stylistic self, the self construable from the way words fall in a conversation or on a page” (2).

Many composition teachers resist the idea that students should create their identities in writing because it seems to conflict with the idea that we should all be honest as writers, that somewhere deep within us is an irreducible core of being that must be accurately reflected in our writing if we are to be authentic. But as literary critics (which most composition teachers were trained to be), we have no difficulty with the notion that real writers—the ones we study in literature courses—create their identities and voices. Robert Frost, for example, often comes across as warm, genial, tolerant, ironic, and funny—on the whole, quite pleasant company. But some biographical evidence suggests other views of Frost’s personality. Nobody, I think, would argue that Frost’s essential self as perceived in those biographies should have been the self on the page, or that the poems would somehow be more authentic, more true, had Frost’s literary and
non-literary identities been more closely aligned. We can all see the wisdom of Wayne Booth's idea that the flesh-and-blood author may have little to do with the "implied author" whose identity resides only in the writing itself, "the creative person responsible for the choices that made the work" (11). And we all understand, don't we, what Yeats means when he says "Myself must I remake?"

So I don't talk much to my students anymore about being authentic, about discovering real selves among all the phony shadows. The real self, if such a thing exists, might well not be worth exploring after the discovery. I'd rather talk to my students, instead, about creating themselves in what they write, about writing as though they were the kind of person they think they'd like to be at the time they write. Whether they're like that person when they're not writing isn't much of my business. What is my business is to deal with the problem Gibson writes about:

The characters we create for ourselves, the characters we become, are too often egocentric and ill-mannered. . . . Style is our way of becoming a person worth listening to, worth knowing. . . . We improve ourselves by improving the words we write . . . [and] by looking at rhetoric, we may begin to know more about who it is we are making believe we are. And then, perhaps, we can do something about it. (110)

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Works Cited


