

*Teacher Teacher:
Poirier and Coles on Writing*

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It is with some of the canniness of his commitment to what he terms “ulteriority” that Frost refrains from remarking on the conventional representation of the oven bird’s characteristic call: “*Teacher, teacher.*” Frost himself is such a teacher to teachers, and so is Poirier, whose splendid book represents the work of knowing at its highest and most unlabored intensity.

—John Hollander, foreword to *Robert Frost:
The Work of Knowing*, by Richard Poirier

IT IS FALL, 2010, and I’m headed toward the final weeks of a first-year writing course, a course I’ve taught every fall since 1973, when I was a graduate student at Rutgers University and teaching for the first time. I have received a paper I’ve read many times before, and I am preparing to teach it in class. I will distribute a copy to my students; I will read it out loud, ask an opening question, and organize the discussion.

If you have taught this course, you’ve received this paper. It is a standard theme, student writing—the writing produced from a certain well-defined (and over-determined) cultural and institutional space. In this version, the student was asked to think about himself as a representative case and to write about the forces that shaped a young person’s life here and now—in the United States in 2010. (The prompt was framed by Kwame Anthony Appiah’s “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections.”)

The writer of this paper had come to college in the fall of 2010 after serving in the Third Ranger Battalion as part of the US Army Special Operations Command. Although everyone in the class knew that he had been in the armed services, no one knew the details. This

was the first and only personal essay I had assigned; his essay was eagerly anticipated and eagerly read. When it came time for class discussion, however, there was only one paragraph that seemed to command attention:

We were on a mission in Afghanistan, and while we were setting into position we began taking fire. This was not uncommon for Afghanistan, because the people there are much more aggressive than in Iraq. Usually the gun fights last only a few minutes, but this one lasted eight hours, during which we took three casualties. One casualty had a gunshot wound to the shoulder, and one had a gunshot wound to the foot. These two only spent a few days in the hospital. The third casualty, Matthew Bradford Smith, had a gunshot wound to the leg which severed his femoral artery. This wound would ultimately lead to his death eight days later. This was by far the most difficult time of my life, but I think I have become a better man because of it. After learning to deal with pain that extreme, I can easily say that there is not a situation that I can't handle. Problems that seemed so difficult before are now easily solved. It is a horrible way to learn a lesson, but it is important to learn from every situation in life no matter how good or bad it is.

When I asked the class, "What is it that makes this passage notable, remarkable?" the students wanted to talk about the quality of the sentences. The prose (they said) was calm, confident, understated; you felt the authority of the writer; there was, they said, the ring of truth. The sentences, that is, came from within the experience; the speaker was both in the story and on the page. Someone mentioned Hemingway. The best sentence, by acclaim, was the one that named the central character: "The third casualty, Matthew Bradford Smith, had a gunshot wound to the leg which severed his femoral artery."

I asked what other sentences they could find that had a similar charge. And they pointed to the first sentence and the phrase, "setting into position," a phrase that is not an ordinary one. And they pointed to the sentence about the differences between firefights in Iraq and Afghanistan.

No one wanted to talk about the sentences that followed. It was my job to bring them forward and to make them a focus of instruction, which I have learned to do by asking students how and why they might be revised.

This was by far the most difficult time of my life, but I think I have become a better man because of it. After learning to deal with pain that extreme, I can easily say that there is not a situation that I can't handle. Problems that seemed so difficult before are now easily solved. It is a horrible way to learn a lesson, but it is important to learn from every situation in life no matter how good or bad it is.

The simplest thing to say of this moment in my student's paper is that it marks a break from the previous sentences—there is a shift in tone and intent; the essay moves from narrative to argument (an argument about a Lesson in Life). The prose becomes flat and predictable, rehearsed. “It is a horrible way to learn a lesson, but it is important to learn from every situation in life. . . .” At this moment the writer offers a sentence that could be the key sentence in any number of essays telling any number of stories in any number of contexts and at many moments in history: *My Parent's Divorce*, *My Automobile Accident*, *My Summer Job*, *My Sports Injury*, *Not Making the Cut for the Student Musical*, *The End of a Romance*. I learned a lesson, and I'm a better man because of it.

I wanted to teach my students to ask a different kind of question—not “what does this story say?” but “what does it do?” Not “what lesson can we learn from this text?” but “how might this text be revised?” I wanted to call attention to the drama enacted in the prose. I wanted to ask: what does it mean to be a writer in the midst of such sentences?



I learned to ask these questions as a graduate student at Rutgers. I went from Ohio Wesleyan University to Rutgers, and then, with a new PhD from Rutgers, to the University of Pittsburgh (turning down a job

as a Victorianist at Boston University along the way). I went from a dissertation on Thomas Hardy to a career in Composition and Rhetoric, a trajectory that seemed baffling to many of my friends and teachers, but which seemed sensible to me then and seems perfectly sensible to me now. (It is worth noting that a remarkable number of graduate students from my cohort at Rutgers went on to have influential careers in Composition and Rhetoric: Don McQuade, Linda Flower, Pat Bizzell, and Bruce Herzberg, among others.)

Let Rutgers and Pittsburgh stand as placeholders. I want to think about a line of force in the teaching of writing that begins with the creation of English studies at Cambridge University in England in the 1920s and that connects a number of other institutions—including Amherst, Harvard, Rutgers, and Pittsburgh. The line I want to draw links people and places that are not a part of the usual accounts of the history of composition in the United States.

I rely on the phrase “line of force” because I am not setting out to write intellectual history or to tell a story of influence. I want, rather, to trace a set of common concerns, concerns carried by an odd, deep, and persistent vocabulary, a set of terms that enabled work at different institutions at different moments in time—and, in particular, as it enabled certain forms of teaching.

I take the phrase from the opening sentences of Richard Poirier’s surprising essay, “Learning from the Beatles”:

I am proposing that a line of force in literature beginning with some American works of the last century and passing through Eliot and Joyce to the present has offered a radical challenge to customary ways of thinking about expression in and out of the arts. And I am further proposing that because this challenge hasn’t been sufficiently recognized, criticism, especially as practiced in the university, where it should be most exploratory, simply fails to give an adequate reading to some of the very texts it cares most about, and shows almost no capacity to cope with what are considered less distinguished ones placed under the heading of popular culture: in films, advertising, TV entertainment, the music of the young, or dance.

And the voice in my head adds, *or student writing*. Damn it. Student writing should be part of this list. *Because this challenge hasn't been sufficiently recognized, criticism, especially as practiced in the university, where it should be most exploratory. . . shows almost no capacity to cope with student writing—or the teaching of writing.* It is not a huge leap to include student writing as one of the less distinguished genres—one more genre to which criticism must learn to attend.

This is how I read Poirier then (and how I continue to read him now), as if we were talking about the same things, sharing the same concerns, arriving at similar conclusions. I am aware that this way of reading does violence to his prose.

Poirier was my first and, in many ways, my only writing teacher. I took his required first-year seminar, “Introduction to Graduate Studies,” and, because I found him to be such a commanding presence, I turned to his writing—as though I might, myself, find a way of inhabiting these remarkable sentences: *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* and the essays that later became *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life*.

I was taken first of all by the prose, which demonstrated as well as argued that writing was an *action*, “an activity, an agitated, often dislocating effort to appropriate and change the reality it confronts.” At its most alive, he said, “writing exemplifies the *kind* of effort that can and needs to be made by anyone who proposes to make more than submissive sense of the world as it now is.”

This was a concern Poirier brought to the work of Mailer, Pynchon, Eliot, and Frost, but it was also applied to the regular short papers we wrote for his course. On mine, he would often write in the margins, “Don’t do that.” He was teaching me to see a sentence as a gesture, as indicating a way of being alive in the world—one that I would do best to treat with suspicion. And I knew exactly what he meant. They marked moments when I was most trying to be a good graduate student, a would-be professional, going on and giving in as I moved confidently toward an inevitably rounded conclusion. I had to

chuckle when I read through the remarks collected in the Spring 2010 memorial edition of *Raritan*, published after Poirier's death in 2009. Jackson Lears had asked contributors for comments on Poirier's role as an editor. Mark Edmundson wrote:

He was very formidable and at the start a little scary. . . . He pushed me, early on, to stop writing like an assistant professor. Then, in time, he nudged me away from a style that he thought too pop. He was a great stylist himself and he understood, I think, that developing a style was about developing a sense of yourself—who you were and what you might be and do.

That is what I heard Poirier saying to me: “don't write like a graduate student.” Don't do that. Don't be that person. He characterized my prose by asking me to consider its central character—some version of myself as a young intellectual. (*Who do you become when you talk that way? Who do I become, your reader, if I take you seriously?*)

These are questions I carried to the margins of my own students' papers, a pedagogical move I also learned through the example of William E. Coles, Jr., one of the other great teachers in my career, who is connected to Poirier through the shared experience of teaching writing to first-year students at Amherst College, in a course developed by Theodore Baird. “Stop writing like an assistant professor.” Don't be disciplined by the discipline. Find a way to be present rather than absent inside your sentences, within the genres of academic work.

Coles would say to his first-year students, “Stop writing like the 1,000-year-old-man, like the Jolly Green Giant; don't be such a phony.” I. A. Richards once characterized the voice he heard in a student paper as the voice of “our expert on the real world.” For all these teachers, the first and most important pedagogical move was to characterize the prose, to assign it a voice and, through that voice, a position in a recognizable social world, one that could be considered and revised.

I felt that I had gained access to a profession by questions such as these, questions that I took as guides for revision. At the time it did not feel like surrender. It was inspiring to feel that my own sentences could define a project, a field of work, even a career. At the end of

Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing (1977), Poirier calls upon Thoreau to make this point about a writer and his field:

How does anyone “know beans”? More perplexing still, how does anyone know that he knows them? This is a question set and answered by Thoreau and, with more subtlety and less show-off wit, by Frost in his poems of work and in the work of his poems. The answer is that you “know” a thing and know that you know it only when “work” begins to yield a language that puts you and something else, like a field, at a point of vibrant intersection.

At my best, I felt like I had entered, at least briefly, such a point of “vibrant intersection.” In my teaching, I often use this passage as a headnote to a writing assignment. I also like to use these sentences from Stanley Cavell: “I recognize words as mine when I see that I have to forgo them to use them. Pawn them and redeem them to own them.”



I have been writing about Poirier as a writing teacher, mine. There is, however, a pedagogical imperative throughout his work, one whose object it is very hard to name or to define without using a word like composition. To make this point, I will be relying on only two of his books, both from the 1970s—the book on Frost and *The Performing Self* (1971).

In the era of de Man and Derrida, the era of big statements and specialized vocabularies, Poirier was an anomaly. He wrote in an ordinary language—few endnotes, if any; few references to critics or scholars—and he insisted that his subject, too, was ordinary, everyday. He insisted that his subjects were reading and writing, small *r* and small *w*, rather than Literature and Criticism, capital *L* and capital *C*. It was as though these big words belonged to a discourse he could never quite share or never fully enter, at least not seriously, not willingly.

As I read his work, and I say this with admiration, he had one fundamental point to make about reading and writing, reading and writing as a form of action, as performance, and he made this point

over and over again by means of dazzling demonstrations, readings of key passages from key texts, texts that engaged, enlarged, and repaid his attention, and he wrote these readings out as performances of his own, where the admiration for the work he was presenting was matched by the energies and odd rhythms in his prose. He provides a series of brilliant readings, all meant to demonstrate what it meant to be alive as a writer (or dancer or composer or singer or teacher), and these were applied to a quite daunting range of materials, a range that continued to increase until the end of his life, and that moved beyond classic literary texts to include a variety of forms of high and popular culture, from Balanchine to Bette Midler.

His work suggests that this is the only way to teach the work of knowing, by setting out to do it again and again, by providing demonstrations to show that it can still be done and that the need is as urgent as ever. The struggle to be present in language, to know that you have known something, requires repetition, the same thing over and over but with a difference and a continued sense of purpose. It is the application, or the constant struggle, that keeps the method alive and in circulation.

Poirier would often turn to the gym for his metaphors—talking about muscle memory achieved through exercise and repetition. This lesson, he says, “is something athletes know as well as laborers of a certain kind. To do any job well requires the capacity to concentrate on the labor with a full and simultaneous awareness of the different orders of experience that get brought into play.” He returns several times to Frost’s articulation of this poised moment—where inside a sentence something can be made to happen:

Every single poem written regular is a symbol small or great of the way the will has to pitch into commitments deeper and deeper to a rounded conclusion and then be judged for whether any original intention it had has been strongly spent or weakly lost; be it in art, politics, school, church, business, love, or marriage—in a piece of work or in a career. Strongly spent is synonymous with kept.

And Poirier translates Frost in these terms:

Poetry is not life, but the performance in the writing of it can be an image of the proper conduct of life. The exercise of the will *in* poetry, the *writing* of a poem, is analogous to any attempted exercise of will in whatever else one tries to do. This position is not asserted, since the whole point, after all, is that nothing can be carried merely by assertion. One can only “pitch” in “deeper and deeper,” and in this passage itself there is a demonstration rather than simply a claim of the validity of what is being said. The validation is implicit in his inclusive suppleness of voice. As in similar moments in Thoreau, the voice here manages to show its facility in the tones and nuances—like the submerged metaphors of sex and love-making, of farming and business—that belong to the tones, the argots of occupations outside poetry.

And this was the reason for teaching Frost—to learn to hear (and to value and to produce) such tones and nuances. These were the fundamental lessons in reading and writing. How does it sound? Where does it place me? Where do I stand? Where and how do I locate myself in this if and when I speak or write?

Frost provided the spirit and the occasion for the training one needed to stay alive in language, to be wary of its false securities and to work toward something other than routine (or submissive) understandings of matters concerning human life:

Frost seems to me of vital interest and consequence because his ultimate subject is the interpretive process itself. He “plays” with possibilities for interpretation in a poetry that seems “obvious” only because it is all the while also concerned with the interpretations of what, in the most ordinary sense, are the “signs” of life itself, particular and mundane signs which nonetheless hint at possibilities that continually elude us. . . . His reiterations about the limits of metaphor and the boundaries of form are evidences not of fastidiousness or fear—though he shows instances of both—so much as an effort to promote in writing and in reading an inquisitiveness about what cannot quite be signified.

I love what happens to a word like “inquisitiveness” in a paragraph like this. On the one hand there is a drama unfolding here of biblical dimension—something vital is at stake, life itself perhaps; there is the occasion for fear—but in the end it is not a matter of superhuman achievement. The end falls to basic human intellectual capabilities, and to a very ordinary quality, something like “inquisitiveness,” to be in the game.

If you think of the era of high theory in English studies, you can quickly call up any number of very technical descriptions to demonstrate that only a select few can be granted anything like critical awareness. For me, the importance of Poirier’s work is that it always located critical, intellectual work in the broadest possible arena, available to everyone or anyone who will do the work and who will learn to be inquisitive.

Still, it takes an effort of will to bring these passages to the work of student writers in a composition course. Even though he insists, as he does above, on a pairing of writing and reading, the classroom he imagines is one where students learn by reading. This is from the opening to *The Work of Knowing*: “To some extent any poem is an act of interpretation, an inquiry into the resources of the language it can make available to itself. Reading is an analogous act calling on its own literary resources which may, at times, be greater or less than the poem’s.” It is not that this is an odd twist—that you learn to write by reading. That the “expenditure in the writer” could “generate a corresponding energy in a reader” and that this energy would carry over again to the student who will be writing. In some ways, it was a commonplace in the 1970s to think that the reading of literature would have inevitable and beneficial effects on student writing. This is a pedagogy with a long history.

Poirier’s argument, however, stands well outside the commonplaces about the value of literary study in the 1970s. Each of his books insists upon this. His is not a trickle-down theory. Nor is it a form of the New Criticism. He argues for a very specific and determined form of work, with certain kinds of texts and with very local rewards or consequences. His attention is to the sentence and to style—and these

were not the usual points of reference when first-year writing courses were built around a standard set of literary texts.



Poirier's 1970 collection of essays, *The Performing Self*, takes as one of its subjects the undergraduate curriculum in English. He challenges a reader to turn to and to think about a scene of instruction represented not solely on the page but also in a college classroom. In its final sentence he calls for a "new curriculum," one that can answer to the energies he describes in the book's preface:

Writing is a form of energy not accountable to the orderings anyone makes of it and specifically not accountable to the liberal humanitarian values most readers want to find there. . . . Energy which cannot arrange itself within the existing order of things, and the consequent fear of it which takes the form of repressive analysis—these are what make the literary and academic issues I shall be discussing inseparable from larger cultural and political ones.

Writing is a form of energy that, at its best, is resistant, uncomfortable, out of the mold. This is the key to understanding the relations between writing and schooling, where the discomfort, the mismatch, is the condition of the classroom and the starting point for instruction. A similar argument was being worked out in the late seventies in the composition community. I am thinking, for example, of the work of Richard Ohmann and Mina Shaughnessy.

Ohmann's *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* (1976) argued that writing in English 101 had become little more than a form of social engineering designed to produce middle managers. (Ohmann had been part of the group working with Brower and Poirier on the first-year course at Harvard.) Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for Teachers of Basic Writing* (1977) provided a close reading of hundreds of student papers written at City College in New York during the early years of the Open Admissions program. Shaughnessy argued that the reported "failures" in student writing

were, rather, evidence of wit and energy, style and strategy, as students did what they could (if not what they “should”) with the language and expectations of the university.

And as he is writing about a new curriculum, he is unable to avoid the fact of student writing. This pressure comes to a head in the essay “What Is English Studies, and If You Know What That Is, What Is English Literature?” This essay has been a touchstone for me. I’ve taught it and returned to it many times. In it, Poirier asks this question:

What, then, is anyone to do who thinks of himself as a custodian not so much of language in the abstract but even of his own language? How can he begin to dislocate language into his own meaning?

I think it is important to hear the word “anyone” in that opening sentence: *what is anyone to do who thinks of himself as a custodian of his own language?* The case is not being made only on behalf of genius or those of proven critical sophistication; it is not being made only on behalf of graduate students or English majors. (I remember Poirier once asked us to prepare a writing assignment, something we would use in teaching *Antony and Cleopatra*. And I asked, but what about the audience? Was this to be an assignment for a freshman English class, a class for English majors, a graduate seminar? And Poirier answered, “What difference would it make?”)

The argument pertains to *anyone* who hopes to be a custodian of her own language. And I think it is important to hear the word *custodian*, as it calls up vocations both high and low. Poirier then turns to writing as a matter of technique: “How can he begin to dislocate language into his own meaning?” And then he moves to his conclusion—where he can’t *not* speak to the broad concerns of an education that takes seriously the problems of writing:

Locating, then watching, then describing and participating in this struggle [the struggle for verbal consciousness] as it takes place in the writings of any period could be the most exciting and promising direction of English studies. It points to where language and history truly meet. Literary study can thus be made relevant to life not as a mere supplier of images or visions, but

as an activity; it can create capacities through exercise with the language of literature that can then be applied to the language of politics and power, the language of daily life.

Poirier goes on, driven, I think, by the necessary indeterminacy of his key terms “capacities” and “exercise” to imagine again a pedagogical encounter:

It is simply terribly hard to do this, however—to make this shift of muscularity of mind and spirit from one allegedly elevated mode of expression, where the muscles can be most conveniently developed, to another mode of expression both more inaccessible and considered so ordinary, so natural as to be beyond inquiry. And yet in this transfer of activity, and the reciprocations that follow from it, is the promise of some genuine interplay between different and multiplying cultural traditions.

Including, I would add, the difficult interplay between the work of students and the expectations of the academy.

I’m going to compress the final argument of Poirier’s essay by working with just short passages:

If English studies is not in command of a field of knowledge it can be in command of a field of energy. . . . English studies cannot be the body of English literature but it can be at one with its spirit: of struggling, of wrestling with words and meaning. . . . It can further develop ways of treating *all* writing and *all* reading as analogous acts, as simultaneously developing performances, some of which will deaden, some of which will quicken us.

The emphasis is in the original, and it is essential to the argument, since Poirier is worried that readers will be mentally editing out certain acts of writing and reading as beneath or beyond the range of reference.

Once on its way, this activity can be applied to performances other than those occurring in language—to dance and sports, as much as to film or popular music. English studies must come to grips with the different languages of popular culture, with newspapers, political speeches, advertising, conversation, the conduct

of the classroom itself. Until proven otherwise, none of these need be treated as if it were necessarily simpler than any other or than literature. The same hard questions for all.

Why is there no more direct reference to student writing? Composition becomes a necessary term in this essay, and yet the course that carries that name is unacknowledged. *The same hard questions for all*. Poirier was closely involved with Humanities 6 at Harvard (he writes about this, and about the course at Amherst in *Poetry and Pragmatism*), and this course was defined by a regular sequence of writing assignments, “exercises” they were called. Why is it so difficult for Poirier to represent students as writers—and not just as readers? Or to imagine that students could learn these lessons by writing poems or by writing prose? It is not as though composition and creative writing were unthinkable as courses in an undergraduate curriculum in the 1970s. They may have been unmentionable. But I don’t see (or hear) Poirier expressing such disdain.

Why is composition absent? One simple answer, I think, is that Poirier was unwilling to let his subject be coopted by the emerging professional field of Composition, Composition with a capital C and with its own emerging account of what writing is, how it relates to the traditions of literature, who writers are, what they do, and how they learn. Remember, Poirier is equally determined to distance himself from Literature, with a capital L. He doesn’t want to be part of that institutional location either. I am inclined to say that he is determined to find a language that will preserve some form of language instruction in the lower division, to preserve it as an area of primary concern, and yet still not divide English studies into Literature and Composition. He is imagining something different, something like a department of performance.

And *composition*, in fact, becomes a necessary term to articulate this vision of the possibilities of English:

We ourselves, each of us [anyone], insofar as we are composed in and by language, should be as much the subject of literary studies as is any literary work similarly composed. The confrontation of these two kinds of composition should be the substance of

our work. It is murderously hard work, however, except for those who take for granted the self known as the reader or for those satisfied with the almost invariably slapdash compositions of a self put together for any given discussion of political relevance. It's terribly difficult to find out who one is during an act of reading or to help a student find out who he or she is. And perhaps it is harder now than ever before.

It's terribly difficult to find out who one is during an act of reading or to help a student find out who he or she is. I have wanted to fill in the blanks in order to put *writing* into this sentence. But I don't have to. Listen, rather, to this. It should sound familiar:

Every year I make a new sequence of Assignments, dealing with a new and different problem, so that for all concerned, teacher and student, this is a new course, a fresh progression in thought and expression, a gradual building up of a common vocabulary, a more precise definition of terms. . . . Though I have never repeated an Assignment, every Assignment I have ever worked with, every question I have ever asked, involves the same issues: Where and how with this problem do you locate yourself? To what extent and in what ways is that self definable in language? What is this self to judge from the language shaping it? What has this self to do with you?

Style, writing, composing, the self—these are the terms this teacher is trying to bring into play as the key terms of a writing class.

The document goes on in the same fashion (struggling to say what it is difficult for a teacher to say):

I wish to make clear that the self I am speaking of here, and the one with which we will be concerned in the classroom, is a literary self, not a mock or false self, but a stylistic self, the self construable from the way words fall on a page. The other self, the identity of a student, is something with which I as a teacher can have nothing to do, not if I intend to remain a teacher. That there is a relation between these two selves, between writing and thinking, intellect and being, a confusing, complicated, and involving relation indeed—this is undeniable. This relation, in

fact, is the center of both the [composition] course as a course and the course as more than that. . . . Ideally, hopefully, primarily, our concern is with words: not with thinking, but with a language about thinking: not with people or selves but with languages about people and selves.

This is from a course description addressed to students taking a first-year composition course. I've taken it from Bill Coles's 1978 book, *The Plural I*, a book which provides a narrative account of a first-year writing course at Case Institute of Technology (now Case Western Reserve) in the 1960s. Here is its opening:

The subject, the content, or however you want to describe it, of this course is writing. Writing is an action. It is something you do. It is not something you know about except in the same more or less ineffective way you know about health, or you know about the symphony. You do know, for example, that Good Writing should be Clear, Coherent, and somehow Pleasing to a reader. But how to make your writing clear, coherent, and pleasing is another matter altogether.

And here is an excerpt from a course description Poirier prepared for Harvard's Humanities 6 in the 1960s:

This course, we might recall, is an "action," not a body of "material" to be "covered." The "action" of the first half-year is learning how to read and how to communicate the experience of reading through writing. Our whole aim is to secure a higher level of attention to works of literature, to get the student to confront *this* particular work and to discover the satisfaction that comes from attending. There is no sacred method (as students suppose) for achieving this level of attention.

I present these passages to bring forward the echoes between Coles's and Poirier's prose, and not just in the argument that writing is an action, or that what is at stake is the "self," a self that can be found only in sentences, providing a momentary stay against confusion; I'm also hoping that you see the similarities in the rhythms and style, the use of capital letters, the way the language turns back on itself and

against the usual ways of thinking and talking. Even the titles rhyme. *The Performing Self* (1971); *The Plural I* (1978). (And both echo the title of Lionel Trilling's 1955 collection of essays, *The Opposing Self*.)

I want to be clear. I am not suggesting that Coles learned from, drew upon, or was in any way indebted to Poirier or to Poirier's book. I doubt that he read it, and I think I would have known. I knew Bill Coles well in the 1970s. I was his first hire at the University of Pittsburgh, in 1975. I went there to be his Assistant Director of Composition. We worked closely together for about six years, and, after that, we remained colleagues.

I can remember vividly how odd it was in that first year. Although we had no apparent connection, it was as though we shared a common mission and a common language. Bill thought of himself as a maverick, self-made; I thought of myself as clueless, completely unprepared for the job I had taken, and yet we shared a language and a focus that made our work more than collegial. I don't know how else to describe it. We were secret sharers, part of a close circle; when it came to teaching or reading a student paper, to teacher training or curriculum design, there was some deep connection that often eliminated any need for warm-up or for explanation, even exposition.

Coles didn't talk about books like *The Performing Self*; he didn't work that way. The sources he claimed as reference points were always odd and surprising—and determinedly outside the range of what a Professor of Composition was supposed to be reading. He found the professional literature on composition almost impossible to read or to admire; but whatever he read, he read with composition on his mind, and so books that made no obvious connection were read in such a way that they became crucial points of reference about teaching—if only you were open enough to make the connection, to understand that the sentences might speak to you. (One such book, I remember, was Vicki Hearne's *Adam's Task: Calling Animals by Name* from 1986, a chapter of which had been published by Poirier in *Raritan* in 1982.)

Poirier and Coles were part of a circle whose circumference I don't quite know how to draw but whose center point was Amherst, in particular a freshman writing course, English 1-2, directed by

Theodore Baird, and a sophomore reading course, English 19-20, which offered (through Reuben Brower) a model for Humanities 6 at Harvard. These courses provided a powerful, definitive, and sometimes troubling experience for teachers and students.

Amherst remained a crucial point of reference for Coles throughout his career. The course description I cited earlier was based on one developed over time by Amherst faculty. Coles says, “few teachers have had the experience of seeing how either the students’ writing or the activity of working with it can be made into something to be believed in.” He goes on:

I had been so privileged. I was fresh from having taught five years at Amherst College where, in working with Professor Theodore Baird, I had experienced an approach to the teaching of writing that I had seen enable teachers to find themselves as teachers. The approach—it sounds so simple—was one based on making the students’ writing (and not something else), and the students’ writing as a form of language using, the center of the course.

Recall, for a moment, Humanities 6, where students’ reading, and not something else, was to be the subject of the course. I should take a moment to gloss the parenthetical “and not something else” as it functions in *The Plural I*. The reference is deliberately vague, since composition in the 1970s was searching for content, something to write about, but among its references is the composition course that centered on a collection of literary texts.

My colleague Mariolina Salvatori uses Coles to represent the general argument that literature, in the 1970s and 1980s, was not considered an appropriate subject for a composition course, that “students in writing courses had been harmed by a literature-centered pedagogy.” Throughout his career Coles argued that the primary text of a composition course had to be the writing of its students. In this sense, anything that would take time from this, like the weekly discussion of a novel or a poem, was forbidden. As he was developing a composition program at Pitt, he was correct in arguing that faculty, including graduate assistants, knew how to fill up a class period discussing a poem by Frost. They didn’t know how to use a poem by Frost as a lesson in

composition. And they did not know how to talk about a student paper (how to give it attention, how to value it), though their preparation as writing teachers required that they learn to do so.

At the same time, Coles was proposing what you would have to call a literature-centered pedagogy, if by that you mean a pedagogy that insisted on a close attention to language and whose values were derived from literary criticism in the Cambridge tradition (which is different from the New Criticism). The course in *The Plural I* featured assigned readings, usually (but not always) short passages. Sometimes they are used to call up a way of speaking (a discursive field), and students are asked, “What happens if you talk like that? Where do you end up?” But sometimes they are offered as models to emulate or as cruxes to represent fundamental writing problems. A long passage by Darwin functions as the former; an extended passage from Salinger provides the latter.

The key terms in the analysis of writing were voice (or tone), metaphor, and stock response. As such, they extend or put into play the key terms of the Cambridge project (as first articulated by I. A. Richards, one of Brower’s teachers, as Leavis had been one of Poirier’s). This attention to tone was powerfully inflected (redirected) by the presence of Robert Frost at Amherst. Frost, too, is an important presence in the line I am tracing. In the course at the center of *The Plural I*, students learn to see that words or phrases that they take as true, fixed, and transparent, are, in fact, slippery and metaphorical in their relation to the world. This was the lasting point made by Frost in his lecture to the students at Amherst, “Education by Poetry.”

What I am pointing out is that unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don’t know the metaphor in its strength and its weakness. You don’t know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history.

And students learn to judge character (which, in this pedagogy, is evident at the level of the sentence) by attending to voice. Here is Frost:

The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader. I have known people who could read without hearing the sentence sounds and they were the fastest readers. Eye readers we call them. They get the meaning by glances. But they are bad readers because they miss the best part of what a good writer puts into his work.

Coles was offering, to use Frost's terms, a "proper poetical education."

And the point of this education is to find a way of becoming alive inside sentences—to escape or deflect what Coles refers to as "themewriting"—empty, routine, submissive, thoughtless, inattentive, and adrift, content to repeat the standard commonplaces:

Did "experience," shaped in the terminology those writers had used, really continue to exist in some throbbing human fullness somewhere outside that language, in contradistinction to that language? And to go through life Themewriting one's experience into bloodless abstractions—we had a swell time; it was a great trip; she was really cool—was to end up with how much of life having dribbled through one's fingers? Yes, the habit of Themewriting was a choice, I concluded class by saying. But maybe not always a free one, and maybe not one that remained open forever.

Coles carried a composition course from Amherst to (eventually) Pittsburgh. Poirier, with Brower, was part of a group to carry an introductory literature course to Harvard. Poirier wrote about his experience at Amherst in "Reading Pragmatically" (*Poetry and Pragmatism*, 1992).

The essay argues that the creation of a course or a curriculum, something sustained and developed across time, a project that includes the cooperation and training of a staff, can be serious critical work, real and lasting scholarship. Theory can be elaborated in practice, in the argument of a course, including a lower-division, general-education course. In reference to Amherst, Poirier argued that generations of teachers had been teaching forms of linguistic skepticism long before the postmodernist critical revolution:

Certain kinds of intense close reading were being pedagogically advanced, well before the post-World War II period, which without defining themselves theoretically—at the time that would have been thought inappropriate in undergraduate classrooms—or calling themselves skeptical, managed to inculcate in more than a few teachers and students a habit of enjoying the way words undo and redo themselves to the benefit of social as well as literary practice. This latter development was fairly frequent in the more enterprising small colleges, where intimate and intense workshop teaching most frequently occurs. On this occasion I have in mind my own experiences as an undergraduate after World War II at Amherst College and in an undergraduate course I later helped teach at Harvard called “Humanities 6: The Interpretation of Literature.”

Because this tradition took seriously the work of students, what students could *do* with texts, it could not finesse the “vexed question of self-presence in writing and reading.” And he continues, citing Emerson (since, he insists, this is a US and not a French pedagogical tradition):

For Emerson, writing and reading do not, merely because of the deconstructive tendencies inherent in language, dissolve human presence; human presence comes into existence *in* writing and reading thanks to these traceable actions by which, through troping, deconstructive tendencies are acknowledged and contravened. There exists a crude and over-emphatic perception of the assumed antagonism between deconstruction in language, on the one hand, and, on the other, the possible shaping, in language, of Emersonian selves.

Or plural I’s. Earlier in this essay Poirier says, “Reading is nothing if not personal. It ought to get down ultimately to a struggle between what you want to make of a text and what it wants to make of itself and of you.”

My point is a simple one. Even though these two important books are seldom, almost never, read together, they speak to each other. *The*

Plural I. The Performing Self. They belong in the same circle. They are at home together. And because of the odd coincidences of my graduate training, I quickly felt at home with them. (I know. I am a student of Frost. Home can make you crazy, send you out into the woods at night.) They share a language and a style. They do not turn to or rely upon a specialized vocabulary: tagmemics or topoi, clinamen or kenosis. They use ordinary language to do critical work, something beyond the ordinary. And they believe this critical project can be taught to others, to anyone, including the young.



I want to take a moment with *The Plural I*, a book that is now seldom read and seldom taught.

The Plural I is a narrative account of a first-year writing course, complete with copies of student papers. It is organized by means of the writing assignments that defined the course—two each week in a fifteen-week semester—and a narrative recreation of the classroom discussions prompted by the presentation of two or three student papers, hard copies via mimeo or photocopy. The assignments define a sequence (“a fresh progression in thought and expression”) where a “nominal subject” (in this case an exploration of the difference between an amateur and a professional—the real subject, of course, was language and its users) is investigated from one angle and then another, but always through close readings of the students’ papers. The sequence is both “repetitive and incremental.”

The first six assignments ask students to think along with two key terms, *amateur* and *professional*. The course begins with questions of definition in order to call attention to the problem of meaning—meanings don’t reside in words, words are put into play by writers trying to say something. They struggle to communicate, to make the words meaningful to themselves and to others. The better the writer, the more self-conscious the struggle. And so the opening assignment begins, not by asking students for a definition, “What is an amateur?” but by giving them something said (words already in play) and by asking (always) “where and how do you locate yourself with this way of

speaking?” and “To what extent and in what ways is that self definable in language?” And, crucially, “What has this self to do with you?”

In this course, papers are reproduced for each class, and students learn to give close, critical reading to the language on the page. At first it is quite simple. “Who is speaking here? Who do you have to be to take this form of address seriously?” The discussion characterizes students as the Jolly Green Giant or the 1,000-year-old man; writing that is routine or empty, submissive, is called “Themewriting” with a capital T. As the semester goes along, the forms of close reading become much more subtle, the critical positions much more complicated and compelling.

The first paper presented for discussion opens as follows—and a single sentence is enough to recognize the paper and its version of knowledge. It is the standard opening of a first-year writing class: “The question of the amateur’s place in a society of professionals is one that has greatly been changed by the scientific and cultural revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”

In introducing the discussion in class (which is represented in the book through dialogue), Coles says:

I began, as I generally do, with the question of voice, not as a way of suggesting that writing is speech, but to get students used to the idea that sensitivity to words on a page is analogous to one’s response to the tonal variations of the spoken word—a response that for all of us, whatever difficulty we may have in describing how we hear what we do, is immediate and full. The concept of voice, then, involving as it does the *feel* of words, can, after a time, become an appropriate metaphor for the life of writing—or the lack of it.

What sort of voice speaks in this first paper? I asked after reading it aloud with the students. How do you characterize it? What’s your response to what you hear?

I don’t have time to work through the discussion in detail, but I recommend this book to anyone who teaches writing (or who “thinks of himself as a custodian not so much of language in the abstract but even of his own language”). Here is Coles’s summary of the outcome:

None of the students with this first writing assignment behaved any differently from what I expected. Triumphs of self-obliteration the papers were, put-up jobs every one of them, and as much of a bore to read as they must have been to write. I found myself being talked to as though I were a rube (“Now it may, perhaps, be thought by my reader. . .”), unoffendable (“It has probably never been a matter of concern to the reader. . .”) or a confederate, someone in on the joke of why none of it mattered (“of course, we, in a college classroom, can hardly hope to settle the question of. . .”). No observation was too trivial to escape oratorical pronouncement (“It is unfair to call the amateur a ‘clumsy bastard!’”); no moral stance too obvious to assume (“After all, professionals are not necessarily good people”). So far as the proposition was concerned, the students handled it in the way that a Themewriter traditionally handles the Themetopic, as a moral issue (on about the level needed to condemn the man-eating shark), which is to say inside a moral vacuum from which all living concerns are carefully excluded. . . . There wasn’t one student who convinced me that he had a modicum of interest in anything he was saying.

In *The Plural I*, the focus is on what happens in the writing, on what the language does. If a student is asked, for example, to “describe a situation . . . in which someone gave you what you consider to be very good advice,” the final question on the assignment sheet is this, “To judge from the way you have written about it, what exactly is good advice?” The discussion of the papers follows the forms of (and motives for) close reading presented, say, by Poirier’s readings of poems by Frost or in Brower’s textbook, *Fields of Light*. Let me provide a brief example.

In the first half of the course described in *The Plural I*, the discussion often turns to cliché, but moves fairly quickly beyond the simple policing of commonplaces. In writing about himself as, perhaps, an “amateur” lover, one student writes:

It was a cool night, the stars were peeping through the trees, and the night air was holding its breath expectantly. There we were, just the two of us, standing at her front door. She had her hands

behind her back and leaned forward encouragingly. I kept my hands behind my back and leaned backwards.

The class found this to be only one more formula paper, until one student says,

Sure this is trite, but the point is the guy knows that. Here's a simple scene, night air and her waiting and all the rest. The point is that the guy knows what he's supposed to do, but he can't make it. He can't make the scene. That's why he's an amateur. I think he's using the triteness in the paper on purpose.

And Coles, represented in the narrative through the figure of the teacher, says,

I did too and said so. And I went on to say that it was precisely the quality of "using" the writer's consciousness of a cliché as a cliché, which for me created the illusion of character. The clichés the writer uses he transforms syntactically into an expression of a convention which is broken again and again by his character's inability to fill it.

(This discussion of cliché echoes quite closely I. A. Richard's defense of Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" in *Practical Criticism*.)

After presenting the discussion of other student papers, Coles ends the account of this class with:

The students were hearteningly quick to see that in neither instance had the writers begun to do anything like justice to their own tonal complexity. The character of paper two was more than a phony just as that of paper three was more than inept. It was the first example of writing we had shared which created the illusion of something like human beings involved in human experience.

Later in the course (and later in the book) Coles refers to this as a recurring problem, the fundamental writing problem that motivates the pedagogy of this course:

A great many students seemed for some reason to resent the suggestion that the self might be seen as other than one, entire,

and whole. But in order to preserve the notion of the self as irreducible, and as a consequence to have to develop some alternative metaphor for “people,” the students either ground out allegories on the nervous system (my logic told my emotions; my conscience told my reason) or leeches onto the vocabularies of language systems with which they had only minimal familiarity (my id told my ego). The difficulty in both cases was that the students had nowhere to go in explaining themselves. . . . Again, I was facing a set of papers most of which were only one sentence deep. Again the problem, though I wasn’t about to talk this way in class, was one that involved an inadequate understanding of language as metaphor.

At the time of its publication in the late 1970s, when composition was beginning to develop a set of methods, a literature, a constellation of stars, *The Plural I* proved to be largely unreadable. Those who reviewed it or wrote about it (or spoke about it at meetings) pretty much missed the point. For one thing, the book requires a sophisticated ear. And it assumes that a reader will give time and attention to the student writing. You can’t skip over the student papers. They are not just illustration; they are where the action is, and so you have to read closely and with particular attention to tone and voice.

It was also a book that blurred genres. *The Plural I* is both fiction and report. It is narrative nonfiction, or “creative nonfiction,” a genre that is now part of the stock and trade of every MFA program, but in the 1970s, when composition was turning to ethnography, looking for positive, “scientific” access to student learning via descriptive accounts of scenes of instruction, its audience was poorly prepared and predisposed to file the book outside the categories of scholarship. Coles was misread, and his book was characterized, perhaps inevitably, as either touchy-feely or as a narcissist’s memoir. Its subtle and challenging account of language use was reduced to a single (and reductive) term, “expressivism.”



Let me return to the student paper that opened this essay. Below is the revised conclusion of the firefight paragraph. It was completed as a formal assignment three weeks after the first draft. Revision is a fundamental part of the course I teach, not something that is offered for extra credit. It is, in my department, how students learn to write. The point is not to correct a first draft but to take it on its next step. Our students learn to write by learning to work on their own writing, by revising:

The third casualty, Matthew Bradford Smith, had a gunshot wound to the leg which severed his femoral artery. This wound would ultimately lead to his death eight days later. We held an informal ceremony for him in Afghanistan; only the people who escorted his corpse home got to go to the funeral. The picture of the soldier kneeling in front of the boots and helmet of another soldier is a cool decoration until it's you on a knee in front of your friend's boots. [*In the margin, I wrote: "What if this paragraph ended here? What would be lost? What would be gained?"*] As I stood up from in front of his memorial, I tried with all my might to hide that I was crying until I saw the entire formation of guys that I worked with in tears. Only two of the guys really stood out to me, my boss Taylor and my best friend Ray. . . . You couldn't defeat them at anything, and yet there they stand in tears. I have been mad at people and held grudges, but until this day, I can say with complete confidence that I have never known hate or misery. Today I find it difficult to get truly angry at someone, and I don't think I've had any grudges since about three months after his death.

I admire this sentence: "The picture of the soldier kneeling in front of the boots and helmet of another soldier is a cool decoration until it's you on a knee in front of your friend's boots." This is the sentence I would use to define the act (and the importance) of revision in student writing—and it is a sentence I would use to define revision as an act of ordinary language criticism, doing what you can with that which is available. The writer rejects (by deploying) the explanatory power of the standard image of the soldier kneeling in front of the boots and

helmet of a fallen comrade. He has to forgo the language to use the language.

And at moments like this, the language shudders or fails, the writer is at a loss, which is why I find a particular force and appropriateness in the awkward use of the word “cool.” What other word could you use in this sentence if the sentence is moving toward a word like “decoration”? “Cool” is marked as simultaneously ironic and sincere. And the work done by this sentence is why, if I had complete editorial control (which I did not), I would have cut the paragraph from this point on. The writing that follows is initially rough, at least at the beginning (the passage about Ray), but then it becomes smooth and set, comfortable again in a context where comfort is not necessarily of value. These sentences volunteer themselves. As with the conclusion in the first draft, they are drawn from the available stock—from the tool kit marked Lesson in Life.

This, I think, is one of the things a writing course can do—it can provoke and then call attention to moments like this. A revision like this one is a way of making sense present, where sense is always a matter of struggle or contention. I do not expect a student writer to reinvent the narrative of war, to do what our very best writers struggle to do. And I don’t insist that the problem in the essay is the problem of American foreign policy, a willed blindness. This is a writing course. I’m interested in what students can do with sentences; I don’t require a pledge of allegiance or a forced confession.

In “What Is English Studies,” Poirier said,

Literary study might well consist of such “lessons” in how to meet and to know words under different kinds of social and historical stress. The point would be that any given expression in words has to be confronted as if it were meant pointedly, personally for you, meant as a violation, pleasurable or otherwise, of the self you’d put together before this shape of words entered into it and before the self in turn, with all its biases, cautions, histories, moved reciprocally back into those words. Literary study should show how, in this engagement, words can sicken and befoul, heal and uplift us, and how precarious and momentary each such

induced state can be. A class can watch how words suddenly get snatched from our possession and are so recast that we don't want to possess them anymore. This active way of responding to language and to the structures of imagination that are made from it is not, alas, what goes on in the classrooms of our colleges and universities.

An active way of responding to language and to the structures of imagination that are made from it: what better place to do this than the required composition course?

I have been doing my best to teach this course for the last forty plus years. I should be clear. This is not an easy course to teach. There are weekly papers to read and to read closely. (Although the weekly cycle includes revisions, and I find I often look forward to what might come next, at least when a course is going well.) You have to take care with the assignments and the readings. (If you can't engage your best students at their best, it will be a long semester.) The best moments can seem slight in retrospect—or when you describe them to colleagues. And no one enjoys the constant questioning, on either side of the desk. A good teacher learns how and when to praise and to encourage. But if criticism matters, the writing becomes harder, not easier. That is the hard truth of a writing class, and an even harder truth in a required course for first-year students.

I see myself as part of a tradition of teaching that refuses to make a fundamental distinction between reading and writing, Literature and Composition, and this has made me increasingly odd, sometimes illegible, in professional circles (and in my own department), where literature and composition have become separate fields of research and teaching. And so it has been a deep pleasure (and continued encouragement) to read around in that course's long history, a history that came into focus for me in the 1970s, when I began to teach at Rutgers and in Pittsburgh.