

## Chapter 12. Playing Out the Vision: Other Writing About Literature in the Senior Year

While I was working through the insights gained from my studies with Scott McMillin and exploring orthodox Judaism, I continued to complete the requirements for an English major. Given I had taken such an array of courses for different majors previously, and also took a term off for Peace Corps training, during my last year I took mostly literature course in order to fulfill graduation requirements. I now had enough direction, context, and motivation to enter into my studies energetically, and I was able to graduate within the top 5% of my class despite my wanderings in the middle years. During this final year, I continued to grow as a writer through the extensive assignments in my courses and in interaction with the literature I was writing about, but I was mostly drawing on the insights gleaned from McMillin and my religious adventure rather than gaining much from other instructors who at best were serving as competent guides through the texts I read for their courses. Some other instructors served more as foils to react against.

### Shakespeare's Orders and Disorders

To amass the credits for graduation (as well as to quickly leave my mother's apartment) upon leaving the Peace Corps I almost immediately went back to Cornell, rented a room in a shared apartment for the summer, took up a short-term job, and enrolled in summer school. Hoping to continue my engagement with drama, I took a course on Shakespeare's history plays. Drawing on the ideas from the previous drama course, I found Shakespeare particularly interesting in the way he had structured his plays similarly across tragedies, Greenwood comedies, and the late romances. The professor, however, I found dull, and he gave no guidance or direction for the two assigned papers.

I wrote two linked papers on the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* as growing out of and contrasting with those earlier plays of the cycle. The argument stretched across both lengthy papers, and I clearly identified the first paper as a preliminary part of an argument which would not be completed until the second. I began the first with a discussion of two dichotomous readings of *Richard III* which had dominated criticism, one a traditionalist view that the play's end marked the conquering of evil to reestablish royal order, and the other a nihilist modern view, valorizing Richard's disruptive amorality. I suggested that both were true, which my reading of the full cycle would show. In the first paper I focused on the patterned search for order in the Henry plays, expressed

in ritualistic repetition and rhythms, and in the second I elaborated the amoral disruptiveness of Richard, rising to power through transgression against those seeking conventional order. His violent action was undergirded by his awareness of appearances, dissembling, and a witty tongue that turned the words of the conventional against themselves. I then traced his decline and deterioration as he became a victim to the reassertion of order at the end of the play. From my early adolescence, I loved this play, identifying with the disruptive transgressiveness of Richard, so I was predisposed to take the modernist, nihilist reading of the play. What was new for me was positioning this within the demands for order and understanding the self-destructiveness of Richard's actions leading to loss of control and power, leaving him weak and isolated.

The papers were related as two chronological, but overlapping stories—the first of the imposition of ritual order and the second of disruptive amorality. My analysis flashed forward and backward to signal themes or recoup earlier orders. I returned to reinterpret earlier scenes in light of the new dimensions the later argument has added. So the two papers together formed a whole, with different rhythms and foci in different sections to unpack the differences among the different parts of the cycle. The paper's prose has balanced sentences, paradoxical turns, rhythmized syntax and careful observations, as I had learned were expected of literature majors. The professor of this course made a few comments (such as disagreeing over the intent of a critic I cite), but there is nothing that led me to look further into my argument or think through ideas or even sentences where he suggested that I straighten out intentionally stressed syntax.

## A Void

The fall of the senior year I took a thematic criticism course on the void, a specialty of the professor, who was then working on a book on the theme. He lectured with no discussion as far as I remember, though the room was only modestly sized. We were given no particular prompts nor assigned texts nor any other limitation, and we were told only to submit any combination of papers totaling 25 pages. I was not much motivated or excited by his lectures and was hard pressed to find something to write about. The unfocused assignment tacitly invited submitting work we had prepared for any other course—which is what I did for 15 of the 25 pages. While the ethics of this were questionable, he didn't proscribe this double submission nor did he seem to care—and I was far from the only one in this class taking this option. One new paper I did write described the comic anti-masque figures in a series of Ben Jonson's masques, showing how these figures of disorder increasingly took over the presentations. This paper, almost a retelling of a series of jokes, pursued a curiosity about some masques I became aware of in McMillin's survey of British drama, and was organized much as the sequential interpretation of plays in a repertoire as McMillin had assigned. The last paper was something I pulled out of the air at the last minute to make up the last few required pages, an

analysis of the principles, ideology, and class attitudes revealed in one of Bacon's minor essays on architecture, which I then connected to themes in some of his better-known essays. This used the icon device I had used previously, in seeing the larger themes in the smaller object. As well, ideological analysis was something that I took from McMillin's courses.

In this class, however, the professor's comments were brief and perfunctory, suggesting that he didn't read the papers very carefully, sometimes missing the point entirely and at other times indicating he was not expert in the period of the literature discussed, although he did not restrict the assignment to any literary period or region. His grade on each was coupled with the number of pages each paper contributed to meeting the required total. One thing I did learn from this experience was that not all literary scholars and critics shared the same knowledge, nor did they have the same perspectives or evaluative criteria, as this professor's brief comments on one of the papers did not recognize some historical facts I had relied on, and which were highlighted in the other course. A deeper version of this realization was that I was writing papers for specific professors within the intellectual worlds being built within their courses, and readers from outside that space would not share the same orientation, response, or even knowledge of basic facts.

## Writing Without Stress

That fall I also took a comparative literature course on Greek classics in translation. Every week we needed to write a short paper (usually 500-800 words) on the week's assigned readings. We would then read our papers aloud in class. The assignments were narrowly aimed to familiarize us with background historical scholarship and classical literary theory such as from Aristotle or later in the term to comment on the plays and poems we read. The professor, a senior classicist, said little in class or in response to our papers, though he did provide some written feedback, particularly on helping me understand Aristotle's *Poetics* at the beginning of the course. We then had to submit all the papers in a portfolio at the end of the course. I remember being disappointed that he was not delivering the brilliance we expected from our professors, but he did put the responsibility on us, letting the readings transmit the content to us. This course, nonetheless, convinced me I could write papers on demand without turmoil. I often wrote the papers hastily, making only a few handwritten proofreading corrections at the last minute. The paragraphing was not thought through and was often lengthy, but I could churn the papers out and was proud of it. In retrospect it also made me listen to myself reading aloud my own writing to my classmates—and to listen to my peers and see what they were up to. In some ways this pedagogy was in line with some later recommendations from the composition world, and it certainly was a change of pace from the one-way lecture pedagogy that dominated most of my classes.

The first assignment for this course that was more than reading notes was an essay on Odysseus's amorality (at least by modern standards), noting through a series of incidents his lack of concern for life of others, and the egoism of his actions. The essay is in the form of an argument over values, and bears some relation to my earlier essays rejecting perspectives of other authors. But here the professor only comments "well-observed," taking a scholarly distance from the values and viewpoint of the text. An essay comparing Aristotle's, Theophrastus', and Platon's characters, considers the limits and situational appropriateness of stereotypic representations; there was no comment here nor for most of the rest of the term, not even noting misspellings. My essay on the *Illiad* considered the preciseness of the small stories and personal squabbles within the diffuseness of the large story and currents in the conflict. The essay on Hesiod's *Works and Days* examined his pervasive presence and ethos as a teacher, and his admonishment of his flagging student-audience and his delinquent brother. The paper on the anonymous Homeric hymns considered the anthropomorphism of the gods, their motivating passions, and their intermingling among mortals. Consideration of one of Pindar's Olympian odes looked at how he placed himself and the Olympic contenders in human and divine hierarchies. The paper on the *Oresteia* trilogy evaluated the impact of the audience's foreknowledge and the dramatic display of bodies on the *ekkyklema* (a piece of theatrical machinery rolled onto stage) at the climax of the first two plays. I argued that the dread that pervades all three plays sets up the civic resolution of the third, where the dread extended beyond the fate of the characters to the fate of the city. The next paper compared the *Elektra* plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, considering the situation, staging and motives and themes surrounding the murder scene in each. The paper on *Oedipus* examined how his initial political identity is overcome by his personal story and psychological transformation, which led me to consider how the state was seen as an extension of the king. Here (as in a number of papers that summer and fall) I contemplated the egotism and hubris of the characters, something that I had been working to put to rest in myself. In the final paper on Euripides' *The Bacchae*, I commented on the madness of the play, the comic absurdity of the stage events, and the delusional isolation of the characters, each in their own mental world. This set up a discussion of the central mad divide between Dionysus and Pentheus—finding the tragedy in the inability of the gods and man to talk to each other—leading to heightening conflict in their madness. The influence of McMillin is evident and manifold in all the papers on Greek drama.

## Trying to Comprehend Milton's Grand Vision

The papers for the final course that term on Milton showed a care and intensity that I did not give the classics course. The first five-page paper on the opening lines of *Lycidas* presented the poem as a search for order. The larger theme and the trajectory of the whole poem were sympathetically laid out in the opening

two paragraphs, and then I returned to the opening to walk through a line-by-line explication, focusing on the poet's distress in the compelled picking of berries and dolorous description of an action out of order, too early, unripe. King's death is withheld to line 8, when it too is described as a disruption of nature. I ended with the start of a new broader cycle of expanding disintegration in line 10. This paper reflects the skills I had developed in structuring a close reading, looking at many details, and using openings as a way of creating the world and problematic of the work revealed in multiple dimensions—theme, prosody, imagery, action, and structural movement. The teacher commented on two statements and corrected a couple of comments, but mostly thought it was “artfully done.”

The next five-page paper on Comus did not go so well. The theme I pursued was shallower as I walked through the poem pedestrianly, showing that every time Comus offered a delight it was undercut. I remember not being sympathetic to the poem, but I was also aware the professor was deeply committed to Milton's world view. I found it hard to say much interesting on the masque without getting into the kind of conflict that occurred in the Goethe course. I remember avoiding saying anything inflammatory, but also avoiding saying much of any interest. The professor in return said little to me; he objected to some of my more unusual word choices, noticing some vagueness in my pronoun references, and remarked on my typewriter's dirty typeface. His comments on my linguistic and device hygiene reinforced my growing awareness that teachers' evaluated student interest, sophistication, intelligence, and general worthiness for mentoring attention through the written work the students submitted. Giving students the tools to overcome the negative stereotypes that kept reinscribing these educational inequities was to become a major theme of my teaching once I found myself on the other side of the desk. My commitment to supporting writing in the disciplines was in large part to help students find acceptance and positive attention from teachers who would support only those students they saw as “promising” and judged were capable of learning to talk their talk.

At the time, however, I did learn my lessons about neatness and about making a deeply structural argument on the next paper—the major one for the term on *Paradise Lost*. In its 8 pages the prose is taut, well structured, with lots of forward energy in the telling and complex reasoning as it moved paragraph to paragraph. In the opening paragraph I directly identified a structural narrative problem at the start of Book 11: how does one justify and carry out the two final books of expulsion when the story of the fall already seems resolved? The next two paragraphs outline the solution of connecting abstract good and evil to the complex world we live in, and the fourth paragraph specifically lays out the structural solution, of prospectively presenting the history of humans, creating the power of the journey forward, encapsulated in the closing lines of the poem. This structure elaborates the loneliness and suffering ahead, but also the hope. Book 11 presents despair and Book 12 hope, destruction, and resurrection. In the middle of the paper's third page, I began examining the details of the narrative seriatim, casting

Adam as the lonely just man moving through history. I was clearly identifying with Adam's dilemma as I felt laden with doubt and despair in a sinful world, while looking for an ancestral home and seeking faith and hope during my year of religious quest. The professor really liked it, and in his comments raised some questions in relation to Milton's theology. He now clearly gauged me as capable of considering such questions.

My final short 2-page paper on *Samson Agonistes* compared Milton's self-controlled, articulate, intellectually distant Samson with the sensual, violent, inarticulate, impulsive Samson of the Bible. Milton's and Samson's development of inner light changes the emotional actions reported in *Judges*. The paper has a simple two-part comparative structure. The teacher liked the analysis, and made little comment.

## Some Final Essays

In the spring term for a course on Anglo-Saxon poetry, I wrote on the *Anglo-Saxon Exodus* poem, presenting a rationale for the interpellation of the stories of Noah's and Abraham's covenants within the deliverance from Egypt, in contrast to the standard interpretation at the time that treated the insertion as accidental, though since then the standard interpretation has come to align with my undergraduate intuition. My argument was structural, placing the events within the larger theme of covenant and Moses' laws, including insertions during the march across the Red Sea of histories of past floods, the sacrifice of Isaac, and other genealogical and historical events connecting god's deliverance at the Red Sea with other affirmations of the covenant and moments of divine protection. This is a trope related to my analysis of Book 11 of *Paradise Lost* placing a historical vision at crucial transition moments within a divine relationship, and is tinged with my then current concerns with Hebrew history and Talmudic law. My analysis is detailed, contrasting what would be expected with what actually appears. My prose is concise and energetic, carrying the argument forward, but the spelling is sloppy. The professor calls the argument rushed and slapdash and lacking knowledge of milieu— but he considers the novelty of the idea promising, suggesting a fresh perspective on the poem. I should also note that here as in several other papers throughout my undergraduate years I included small ironic, self-abnegating comments, abashed by the idiosyncrasy of my perspectives. Here it was reflected in the title of my paper "A Misreading of the Anglo-Saxon 'Exodus.'" Since at least adolescence I had developed self-deprecating humor to defuse my sense of seeing things differently than others. It has always been, and continues to be, difficult to speak and write in a full-throated way, though I have tried to expunge markers of self-abnegation or apologies for that difference in my writing. I have also come to learn that my ironies are often missed in both speech and writing, so I have learned avoid them or to mark them much more clearly when I do use them.

The one last undergraduate paper I have was for an unusual music appreciation course devoted entirely to Bach's *B Minor Mass*. The professor, the prominent composer Karel Husa, thought the best way to introduce non-music students to a deeper understanding of music was to dig deeply into a single great work. Each week we worked through a section of the mass, looking at how the elements of music contributed to the power of the music. Since my musical training was more limited than most students in the class, the course proved a challenge, but it was exciting. I did not have, however, a large set of musical analytic tools to address the assignment for the major paper, to comment in depth on one segment, so I drew on what I had been learning in dramatic literature. I examined the one movement that represented anything like a dramatic scene—the Sanctus depicting the chorus of angels praising God—comparing it to a more overtly dramatic work by Bach, the *St. Matthew Passion*, in particular to the opening chorus of the Passion where the distressed crowd is witnessing Christ's journey to the crucifixion. Both presented the response of a crowd to a divine event, but the tense emotionality of the crowd witnessing the events leading to crucifixion contrasted with the timeless awe of the Sanctus. This contrast highlighted the way the mass creates a liturgical experience of absorption into timeless divine connection. I follow this idea through contrasts of dramatic structure, sequence of events, musical structure, musical emotions, text choices with repetitions and disruptions, chorale exchanges, relation of the chorale words to orchestral sound, counterpoint and harmonies, and total emotional experience. Even though I was examining musical issues, the analysis used detailed musical evidence in much the same way I had been using details of dialogue, setting, and action in my literature papers. Other parts of the paper read very like the theoretical parts of the papers I had been writing for the drama courses. I remember having spent a lot of time and thought on this paper and consulted regularly with my music major friend, who was amused by my attempt to compare such different works using an approach from drama. He repeatedly commented, "well I guess this proves you can compare anything to anything." The professor, however, liked the paper, calling it "very well done," and gave only a few notes about historical and cultural context.

## Having Completed My Undergraduate Apprenticeship as an Academic Writer

So by the end of my undergraduate years, I was fairly skilled at writing detailed literary analyses while locating them in larger theoretical themes about structures and experiences of works. As well, I was developing a budding sense of how to consider historical, cultural, and ideological issues in relation to the meaning and experience of the works. I also had some sense of the implications and underlying logic of genres, and was able to move my writing appropriately across different kinds of literary and other artistic objects. When motivated, I also wrote



rhythmic, pointed prose, while articulating more complex ideas with some clarity and precision. I was able to write papers that made original points and gained approval by the professors. As a writer I seem to have accomplished what my liberal arts education aimed for me to accomplish, giving me the necessary space, challenge, reward, and confidence.

While I remember spending some time with yellow legal pads, sketching out some of ideas and phrases for more complex papers, I don't have any evidence of drafts, nor memory of revisions. The kinds of passing syntactic and spelling tangles along with typos indicate I was not a consistent proofreader. In fact, I remember being averse to rereading my papers in the short time between their completion and their submission. Only later, after they were returned could I face them again. Nonetheless writing each of the papers and the conclusions from them were memorable and meaningful, as I experienced them then and I look back on them now.

The writing throughout my college career, though almost all on academic topics working within the purposes and expectations of disciplinary courses, also served important personal functions as they helped me think through the issues and problems that troubled me personally. My writing allowed me to form an understanding of the world I was living in and to develop values and stances to guide me as I went forward. Sometimes the personal meaning was overt and thematized, but more often it was embedded within the critical task and subject matter of the assignment. Not only did the assignments allow me to puzzle through my view of life and my commitments, each assignment increased my intellectual, representational, and evaluative sophistication. The papers I wrote were part of my journey as a writer and my journey through life, much in the way they were for the four students described by Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis in *Persons in Process* (Herrington & Curtis, 2000).

Upon graduation I had no clear idea of what the next chapter in my life would look like. I felt deeply unsettled, but my writing as an undergraduate had formed a way of looking at things that would crystallize in the coming years. As I finished undergraduate life, the times and the draft seemed to have given me little alternative except to continue in graduate school, though not with much of a sense of direction or vocation. I looked forward to something new, but I still felt unease about where I would fit in and what community I belonged to. I was adrift again, though headed for Brandeis, having made my choice on the basis of kosher food which now had no particular meaning for me. Though I did not realize it then, I was on a path that would eventually provide the meaning and purpose that I sought.