

# Chapter 13. Graduate School, Take One: Imagination and Discipline

The summer after graduation I returned to my mother's apartment (now in Manhattan). Within 24 hours I recognized that my experience of religious orthodoxy brought me no closer to belief and was not a way of life I wanted to maintain. Feeling at loose ends and wanting to get away, I drove to the Adirondacks to hike. In one of the towns I passed through I saw a last-minute job posting for a summer camp counselor job, which I signed up for. In midseason, however, I became impatient to get on with my new life in graduate school, left, drove to Boston, and found an apartment in Cambridge. I soon started hanging out for the year with some grad students in a co-op house around the corner. When classes started, I would go to Brandeis a few days a week, but with several seminars meeting in professors' Harvard Square apartments, my life centered in Cambridge.

## Exploring Romantic Imagination

For the remainder of the summer, I read Romantic poets and Coleridge's theory of imagination and metaphor. I wrote poetry. I got interested in arts of contemplation and meditation, which continued over the years in different forms and would be incorporated in my writing processes. I previously had at times high degrees of focus and concentration extending over days, which the psychologist Csikszentmihalyi was later to call flow (1990), but I wanted to be able to invoke that state more regularly, as well as to understand where it came from and what it might mean. I welcomed associative reasoning and abductive leaps, to be filled in and confirmed later.

A related personal psychological development was a growing ability to recall prior emotional and attitudinal states. As long as I can remember I had a strong visual memory, especially for texts, as I could recall exactly where, and on which page of which book I had read something and often could visualize the page. I could also recognize and find my way through places I had been to only once, and I could readily create mental maps. I could visually recall places I had been, and what transpired, including my emotional and attitudinal position in that setting. This then was expanded as I found myself engrossed in texts, by others and myself, and the worlds they created. When I entered psychotherapy a couple of years later, recall of specific interactions was central to discussions with the therapist. For this therapy, I also began writing dream journals to improve dream recall (see chapter 15 below and Bazerman 2001a for fuller accounts of this therapy). At the same time, I briefly studied acting, where accessing emotional and physical memory was central to the method acting technique. Much later when I started studying singing as I have been doing now for twenty years, I regularly used

method acting techniques to guide my interpretation with the result that singing invoked and replayed moments, emotions, relationships, and actions in my life. In the intervening years, every time I had to read a text aloud, and particularly every time I delivered a paper or lecture, I kept in mind the acting dictum not to utter a single word until I could picture and feel the meaning. All of this is to say that I have kept working on building the relationship among the world I experienced, my inner world, and what I expressed outwardly. This nexus of outside, inside, and expression has become an essential component of my writing process, allowing me to locate what I have to communicate and how to project it out into the world.

When the fall term started at Brandeis, I found its graduate program in English and American Literature very much in the mold of other graduate programs of the time. My fellow graduate students were from varied backgrounds, much more than the undergraduates at the school, and the program had a decidedly secular, non-sectarian cast. The program had a strong faculty, focused on canonical literary texts and organized around historical periods—though it did grant more attention to contemporary American literature than was common at the time. Its smaller size and informality, however, offered flexibility to accommodate less conventional students, which was to my liking.

The metaphor-laden, associative-meaning mood that had absorbed me that summer pervaded my approach to my course-work. For a first term course on literary theory, I wrote an extremely associative paper, leaping across centuries among ideas, authors, and theological structures that had been floating around my mind in the preceding years. At the time of writing this paper I had been lost in reading Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus*, where the imaginative force of a demonically-inspired musical composer is recounted through the shuffling voice of a scholarly narrator. The voice of my own paper adopted this doubled perspective, as the professor and poet Howard Nemerov noted. He seemed sympathetic and amused by the paper, but pushed me towards more clarity, explicitness, and audience awareness. I used a similar associative, abductive path in a paper for a more narrowly focused course on bibliographic method, to transform an assigned comparison of the first and second editions of DeQuincy's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* into a speculation on DeQuincy's motives and state of mind. The more conventional professor of this course thought I lacked point. I also turned a related technical assignment to evaluate the process of creating a bibliography into a comic poem in heroic couplets, dripping with self-deprecating irony and attempted literary wit. I undermined the assignment as I manipulated facts to make better jokes and more tortured rhymes, as the professor noted. Only in a paper on Wordsworth's *Prelude* for a course in the Romantics did my ponderings on consciousness and meaning come together as I examined how the poet, in implicit contrast to *Paradise Lost*, created an Epic of the Self, offering a theology of the artist's imagination. While as an undergraduate I learned to explicate canonical texts in detail, now I seemed freed to consider those created

worlds more globally, comparing theologies, visions, and ways of thinking, trying to identify my own truths. Only at times did I bother to give the details of works or the evidence that justified my confidence in my judgments.

In this mood, it was not surprising that in the spring term I was attracted to Lawrence Sterne and imitated his digressive style at the organizational, syntactic, and typographical level, switching voices and stances from moment to moment. In my extended paper on a minor satirical pamphlet, *A Political Romance*, I started out in a more descriptive and sober voice to set out the historical facts but soon turned to Sterne's rhetorical, satirical, and comic strategies, showing them as precursors of the tricks he was to use in *Tristram Shandy*. At the point I entered that analysis, I shifted my voice to use all the Shandean devices that I had described in my exposition, indicating a self-diminishing authorial presence. The professor (the same one who did not appreciate my digressive essay on DeQuincy), however, thought I was only making jokes and missed the analysis. An earlier oral presentation for the same course, on an Alexander Pope satire, was more straightforward and expository, with lots of historical detail and examination of the text aims—and was much better received.

To make light of the literary criticism I was engaging in, I started writing literary criticism in the form of limericks. One of my favorites I wrote then was:

There was a young poet named Donne,  
 Who was inordinately fond of the sun.  
     He courted his mistress,  
     And brought her to distress,  
 By claiming she, and Donne, and the sun, were all one.

My oral presentation for a Shakespeare course, constrained by the expectations of the task, was a more conventional exposition of the history of stage conditions, with some critical comments on the impact of devices and stage organization. I also have notes for another oral presentation of *Love's Labors Lost*, which walks through the play, describing the structure and thematic devices. Both these are handwritten on yellow legal pads, which I favored at the time, using some three by five cards for initial notes. If the papers were to be submitted and not just read, I would type them directly on corrasable typing paper (a transient and now vanished technology of the final years of the typewriter era) or spirit masters (also now a vanished technology) to make copies for seminar distribution. I am not sure of the amount of revision, but my typing indicates some continued sloppiness, and my style had residual casualness, as noted by some instructors. When my papers had heightened styles, like the literary theory or the Sterne papers, I had lots of visible prosodic tricks. Elsewhere the syntax was flattened, but with good control in longer sentences, using serial lists, contrasts, and parentheticals.

## J.V. Cunningham's Discipline

In the spring of my first year, I took a seminar on American poetry with the poet and critic J.V. Cunningham, who was to become my dissertation advisor. His detailed historical scholarship reined in his criticism, and form constrained his poetry. The book of his collected poems, in fact, was entitled *The Exclusions of a Rhyme*. If student presentations did not meet his standards, he would simply ignore them, as not worth commenting on, simply muttering “next.” I lived in dread of that dismissal. His discipline was a major corrective to my recent immersion in Romantic poetic theory, harnessing my imagination to evidence, public defensibility, and clear statement. My papers for him were responsive to his perceived sparseness and demand for evidence. My paper on E. A. Robinson’s “Isaac and Archibald” was a close analysis of prosody, syntax, narrative technique, voice, and structure to reveal Robinson’s intentional poetic choices. When we came to Emily Dickinson, he commented in class that half-rhymes were to her equivalent to full in her hymn meters. I was at first dubious about this, particularly as I was using half and tortured rhymes intentionally for comic purposes, so for my presentation I analyzed all the rhymes in the full collected edition of her works. After a week of counting rhymes, I had to admit Cunningham was correct, but this did lead me to some comments on the role of rhyme in hymn meters, and Dickinson’s awareness of the difference in a few cases when full rhymes had particular effect. Afterwards, having immersed myself in her rhymes and rhythms, I amused myself with a parody of her poems.

The last paper for this seminar attempted to impose a philosophic plot outline on the several disjunct segments of Wallace Stevens’ “The Man with a Blue Guitar.” I offered brief paraphrases of the philosophic positions on the potential of art in each of the sections, showing how they formed a sequential reasoning path. Cunningham remained skeptical of the overall assumption of an argumentative order, as well as the presumed relation to the famous Picasso painting, but he did engage with my argument and made some approving comments on some of the interpretive paraphrases (and some not). I found here and elsewhere his blunt questioning of what he considered flights of fancy and his reliance on facts refreshing, and I remember I thought he was the first one who ever accurately cut through my BS. I took seriously what he said and needed to live up to his standards. I no longer could follow my inner obsessions. My writing style simplified and struggled towards conciseness.

His mode as well changed my poetry from overly complex to more pointed. I joined a reading group of students gathered around him to study prosodic theory and analysis. On Cunningham’s recommendation I read Puttenham’s 1589 *The Arte of English Poesie*, treating it as a practical textbook, coming up with my own examples for each of the tropes and devices Puttenham discussed. Cunningham’s spirit helped me maintain focus on literary studies during the next two years teaching elementary school in Brooklyn. When I returned, he agreed to advise my dissertation.

The last task for the spring was a single text M.A. exam, which we were to prepare for during the term and then write over several hours under controlled conditions. My year the text was Shakespeare's sonnets. In addition to studying the poems intensively, I read all of the extensive criticism I could find. I developed very decided views, largely around the importance of form and convention (aligned with the continuing influence of McMillin and the new influence of Cunningham). I saw much of the criticism as presentist and fanciful, and I saw even the most powerful and most famous sonnets in the sequence as the apotheoses of the conventions of his time, rather than a rejection or transcendence. So when the question was phrased in terms of transcendence of the form, I took exception, and after arguing with the question, I discussed the value of a few of the poems usually dismissed as merely conventional. I then showed how some of the more famous sonnets built on those same conventions rather than transcending them. I don't have a copy of my exam or of the comments, but remember well the process and the reviewers saying I spent too much time arguing with the question, but that I had some good things to say after that. So once again I got in a bit of trouble by not buying into assumptions I could not accept, but at least I was able to give a positive account of my heterodox views. I received my M.A.

## Farewell to Grad School, for a While

Over this year in graduate school, I became increasingly unhappy with literary studies and criticism, as I saw as them alternatively dry and unflavorful or filled with unanchored speculative fancies. Even more, devoting myself to literary studies seemed to subordinate myself to the work of others, who were treated as in a class apart from us mere mortals. Why would I devote myself to the study of someone else's imagination, and not my own production? And what benefit would it serve anyone to have another study of canonical works of canonical authors who already had endless commentaries? I was still something of a lost soul, though now having more of the craft of writing to hold onto, as a way of being. I felt that if I was to stay in the field it would be as a writer elaborating my own world.

As the academic year was drawing to a close, the military draft once again pressed in as deferments for graduate students were removed for the following year. I was opposed to the Vietnam War as a purposeless destruction of a people. I also felt, however, that if I were drafted and placed on the front lines I would be put in a position where I would have to shoot others to protect myself. I feared this more than I feared for my own life—or at least this is what I thought and said at the time.

Given my unhappiness with grad school, I was not heartbroken at having to leave, but I needed to find an alternative. I knew I did not fit the qualifications for a conscientious objector. I made a brief trip to Canada to explore the possibilities of leaving, but during the whole trip I was enraged at the thought of war-hawks making me give up my country so that I could not absorb the possibilities of life

in Canada. Finally, I found a program that would provide me an emergency credential for inner city teaching in New York along with a draft deferment. I went for it. It was incredible good luck, much more than I could have imagined, despite all the challenges those next two years would present.