

CHAPTER 1.

ROOTS OF A REFORMER

I became a university teacher of writing more than thirty years ago with an unusual credential and obsession. I undervalued both. The credential might be described as reverse academic: I did badly in school, dropping out of high school twice and finally flunking out. While most of my colleagues, who had gold stars on their foreheads since kindergarten, could not understand why their students were not learning, even resisted learning, I could understand them; I had been there.

– Donald Murray, *Instructor's Manual (Write to Learn)*

[E]ducation is geared up for sameness. We want our students to perform to the standards of other students, to study what we plan for them to study, and to learn from it what we or our teachers learned. Yet our students learn, at least in writing, if they experience difference. . . . We must learn to accept and delight in the difference we find in our students.

– Donald Murray, “Writing and Teaching for Surprise”

Donald Murray's path to becoming an educational and disciplinary reformer was, by no means, preordained. Murray was an accidental reformer. In joining the faculty at UNH in 1963, he was motivated, principally, by practical considerations, mainly, by a desire to discover a more financially predictable means of putting food on his family's table. After graduating from UNH in 1948 Murray began his journalism career as a copy boy at *The Boston Herald* where he quickly climbed through the ranks. In 1954, he won a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing at which time he left the *Herald* for *Time* magazine, where things did not go smoothly. He left *Time* after just two years,¹⁴ and embarked on a new career as a freelance writer. For the next seven years he penned feature articles and stories for some of the most well-known general interest periodicals of the post-war era. By 1963, however, he was growing exhausted with the life of the writer-for-hire.

14 Murray describes his time at *Time* in various places in his professional correspondence and is consistent in explaining why things didn't work out. The reasons seem to have been both social/cultural and professional. In one instance he writes, “I went to *Time* Magazine, and it was worse than high school. I think I was fired. They made me a TV producer and I was so insulted I quit that day and started freelancing” (Donald Murray Personal Reflection). In another instance, of his time at *Time* he writes, “TURNING POINT: I wanted to be a writer. I accepted offer to work as a writer at *Time*. Bought a Victorian house at 380 Ridgewood Ave., Glen Ridge, New Jersey. *Time* was a cruel and destructive experience. I was fired in less than two years. Well I was made a TV producer when I wanted to write. I was out the door that morning.” (“Donald Murray Revised Chronology”).

When an offer to return to UNH to teach journalism arrived in the late fall of 1962, promising, in addition to a change of pace, those three essential middle-class entitlements to which Murray, a child of the working class, was especially susceptible, i.e., a steady paycheck, health insurance, and a retirement plan, he jumped at it.

In addition to personal motives, there were professional motivations at work as well in Murray's mid-life career transition—or, to be more precise, *writerly* motivations. Having published his first novel, *The Sensation*, in 1963, with the publication of a second, *The Man Who Had Everything*, forthcoming in 1964, and with a contract for a third novel in hand at the time when he received the offer from UNH, the opportunity to become a college English professor seemed to promise the time and space necessary for Murray to continue to pursue his ultimate goal: i.e., to write fiction free of the “commercial pressures” he lived under as a freelancer. In a 1962 letter to his agent Herb Jaffe, Murray muses, “[I]n my journalistic writing I am not doing the work I want to do, that I think I can do, and that I must at least try to do.” He continues: “I feel I have something to say [and] I firmly believe this can be said best in fiction, particularly in novels. This is my first and foremost ambition, to write good fiction” (“Memorandum”).¹⁵

The main thing to know, then, about the *why* of Donald Murray's reform efforts is that he did not set out in life to change the teaching of writing, the discipline of English, or the educational system. Nowhere in Murray's career trajectory leading up to the moment he returned to UNH to teach journalism do we find evidence of a desire to become a disciplinary and educational reformer. Why, then, did Murray swim with and not against the tide once he found himself in new and unanticipated waters during the early years of his second career? My reading in Murray's archive and especially in his autobiographical writing suggests that there were deep personal motivations at work in his decision to pursue a reform path once it revealed itself to him in the years 1963–1965.

In this chapter, in order to better understand these motivations, I first investigate what I call Murray's “literacy narrative,” tracing his early experiences with reading, writing, and schooling growing up during the Great Depression in a working-class city south of Boston. In the stories Murray tells about his school days, I find a clear exigence for his eventual decision to challenge

15 Murray's first writerly goal, perhaps, was to become a famous poet. In 2006, the year of his death, he made a final revision to a chronological timeline he had started years earlier, based on a model he had seen in the book *The Seasons of a Man's Life*. In the entry for 1947, when Murray was 23 and a student at UNH, he writes: “Drove the laundry truck. Studied poetry only. No fiction or journalism. Was determined to be a poet.”

the top-down, teacher-centered approach to education, in general, and the teaching of writing, in particular, that predominated across much of the K–16 system during this formative years. I then turn to examine his experiences as a student and, later, professor in the post-war UNH where, in the mainstream of the curriculum, composition and its teaching were relegated to second-class status. During this same era, however, within the extracurriculum, Murray discovered and participated in an alternative disciplinary instantiation, one that placed writing (of the creative sort) and its teaching at English's center. In this way, Murray found at UNH during his student days a vision of the discipline to oppose and a vision to build upon and extend. He pursued both once he returned to join the faculty in 1963.

ROOTS OF A REFORMER, TAKE I

Throughout his second career Donald Murray thought and wrote a lot about schools, classrooms, and especially teachers—and about how they needed to change. He had good reason. Murray, who came of age during the Great Depression, attended school at a time when silence was seen as a virtue in a child and the classroom a place where teachers did all the talking. “I was trained under the rule that ‘Children should be seen and not heard,’” Murray recalled late in his life. “We were hushed and not listened to; our opinions were not taken seriously. School was a place where we listened to the teacher who did not listen to us” (*Crafting a Life* 12). There was little Murray wanted to reform more, once he found himself in a position to do so, than the traditional relationship between students and teachers. This is signaled most powerfully by the fact that in his first book on writing, *A Writer Teaches Writing*, aimed at an audience not of writers or students but of *teachers*, Murray lists “He Listens” as the first of the seven skills teachers must learn in order to teach well. It was a profound reversal of role between teachers and students and one that challenged the very foundation upon which schools functioned. And it was Murray’s foundational premise, a belief he sustained throughout his second career and an argument he hammered on without flagging: teachers must be people who listen.

Beyond reconsidering the relationship between teachers and students, Murray’s school days struggles also led him to argue, as we see in the second epigraph above, that schools needed to become places that better accommodate difference and diversity. As he reports in numerous places in his corpus of work, Murray experienced the classrooms of his youth as places that cultivated sameness and conformity and refused to tolerate those who did not or could not fall in line. “My parents were told that I did not belong in school,” he recalls in *A Writer Teaches Writing*. “When I see how quickly and how permanently many of our

students are evaluated, I cannot forget the years when I was told I was stupid, year after year, and I believed it” (160). It was not until much later in his life that Murray came to see his learning differences as strengths, but the fact that they led, in his youth, to academic struggle to the point that he eventually failed out of high school was not something he easily forgave, or forgot.¹⁶

In what follows, to better understand the personal exigencies driving Murray once he transitioned to college teaching, I reconstruct his literacy narrative,¹⁷ investigating the autobiographical roots of what I consider to be his foremost reform goal: his advocacy for a new kind of teaching which emphasized listening over talking, receiving over sending, and responding over directing. Understanding Murray’s literacy narrative is important for a few reasons. First, Murray, himself, saw his personal story as a central force guiding and motivating his reform work but rarely led with or mobilized it explicitly to make his arguments. In a late article, “All Writing is Autobiography,” he writes, “I assume that many people in this audience are aware of my obsession with writing and my concern with teaching that began with my early discomfort in school that led to my dropping out and flunking out” (68). While some who knew Murray may well have been aware of his backstory, many, I am sure, did (and do) not. Second, Murray’s failure to draw on his personal story may have come at a cost. As composition and rhetoric drew its attention to the politics of the classroom in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Murray was sometimes caricatured as an advocate of a feel-good, navel-gazing, politically disengaged approach to composition pedagogy. While this characterization is unfair, the fact is that Murray never confronted or responded to it, or, more to the point, mobilized his own personal story to speak back to it, as did others in the field at this time (see, for example Brodkey; Gilyard; Lu; Rose; Villanueva). Third, understanding Murray’s literacy narrative is important because a receptive, listening, responding orientation towards students is, I believe, a foundational element of composition and rhetoric’s ethos that distinguishes us from many other fields. We have Donald Murray, in part, to thank for this aspect of our disciplinary epistemology.

~ ~ ~

16 Given the lifelong challenges he faced with spelling, in particular, Murray speculated that he might have been partially dyslexic. An early report card and the marginal comments from a teacher in a collection of essays he wrote in first-year composition confirm that he had trouble with spelling throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

17 I am not the first or the only one to seek to better understand Murray’s backstory and connect it to his work. In his article “Aloneness and the Complicated Selves of Donald Murray,” Thomas J. Stewart mines Murray’s autobiographical, outside-of-the-field writing to try to understand how his childhood experiences influenced his vision for writing pedagogy. Shane Combs, too, connects Murray’s backstory to his teaching and approach.

Back Row, Sixth Grade

It is always October.
 I trudge to school,
 kick a stone, leap the crack
 that goes to China,
 take my seat in the back row, jam
 my knees under the desk,
 avoid chewing gum, waiting
 for recess. The substitute
 teacher hesitates
 by the door. The bell
 rings. She commands
 attention to the text.
 I cannot find my place.
 There is no meaning
 in the words. Nearsighted,
 I squint at the blackboard:
 The tails of dogs, a banana,
 a winding river, a diving
 hawk. I am in the wrong grade,
 in a foreign school, another
 century. I stare out the window,
 learn how a robin drives a squirrel
 from her nest, imagine
 a fear of wings. Teacher
 calls my name. I speak,
 as surprised as if a bee
 flew from my mouth.

– Donald Murray qtd. in *Crafting a Life* 111

I first encountered Murray’s poem “Back Row, Sixth Grade” in his late-life book *Crafting a Life In Essay, Story, Poem*. He explains that it’s a poem about education, underachieving students, about students with a case of attention

deficit disorder, about day dreaming, about a shy student who didn't speak and therefore wasn't called on, about vision deprivation, about educational theory, educational psychology and a lot of other things. (112)

It's hard to read the poem or Murray's two memoirs, *My Twice-Lived Life: A Memoir* and *The Lively Shadow: Living with the Death of a Child* without thinking that he must have spent a good deal of his adult life trying to make peace with his early years—in *and* out of school. Born in 1924 in Quincy, Massachusetts, a member of the so-called "Greatest Generation," Murray was raised, by his own account, "in a double-decker behind an Amoco station on the trolley line" (*My Twice-Lived* 55). His father worked in the retail clothing business and by Murray's telling appears to have suffered from periodic but lifelong emotional and psychological instability. His mother was a homemaker who, according to Murray, exacted upon him forms of cruelty and abuse that were so severe that they are, at times, excruciating to read about. "I try to make peace with the past by reminding myself I live within a life that is so different from my childhood and so much better than I could ever have expected," Murray, age 72, wrote of his early life. "Still I am surprised at the continuing effort it takes to heal the hurts of a childhood lived so very many years ago, a past that is so painfully immediate today" (*Crafting a Life* 74).

A significant element of that pain stemmed from the silencing Murray reports having experienced as a boy—at home, at school, and on the playground—and the feelings of alienation and disempowerment such silencing engendered. Despite decades of writing and publishing prior to his transition to higher education, Murray did not begin to explore and share personal memories from his childhood in print until the mid to late 1970s, when he published an editorial, "Not-so-good-old-days," in a local New Hampshire newspaper. In this piece and again, later, in a chapter of the same title in his first memoir, *My Twice-Lived Life*, Murray shares and reflects on stories of the challenges he faced in school growing up.

Many of my teachers taught as if they were doing time. It was the Great Depression, and perhaps that was a valid reason.

They were imprisoned in their jobs, sometimes not paid, but still they hung on—for security.

Most of my teachers were women who were forced to teach. I'm sympathetic to their predicament, but I don't romanticize the past. Few of my teachers had much interest in their subject, and most seemed to dislike or fear their students. ("Not-so-good-old days")

In the not-so-good-old-days, Murray recalls, "School was something to be survived" and few young people went on to college or were even expected to. "That was for the kids who lived on the hill. . . . The rest of us were not taken

very seriously.” The teaching methods of his youth were, Murray reports, organized primarily around rote learning. “We were ordered to memorize rules and information without any concept of their purpose or value. Ask ‘Why?’ and you got sent to the principal’s office.” Spelling bees, in Murray’s memory, come in for special criticism. Such practices, he argues, allowed “children who knew how to spell [to] practice what they already knew while the rest of us failed in the first round or the second, sat down and glowered at them” (“Not-so-good-old days”).

Murray’s memories of teachers in the not-so-good-old-days were largely negative. “I hated all but three teachers between kindergarten and graduate school,” he wrote in a *Boston Globe* column published late in his life (“The Past” C3). In high school, Murray reports, he failed out, in large part because of the incompetence and arrogance of his teachers, which he describes at length in *My Twice-Lived Life*:

My English teacher in high school punished me in the eleventh and twelfth grades when she found out I had read ahead of the daily assignment, as I always did, usually reading the whole book the first night. My music teacher argued that Rimsky-Korsakov was a team like Gilbert and Sullivan. My art teacher made me use crosses for eyes. My guidance teacher gave me a B+ for a course in the eleventh grade I never attended. A history teacher jumped me between floors because I was a Scot and therefore on England’s side. He was Irish and on Hitler’s side. When I had the same chemistry and physics teacher in the last two years of high school, he never told me that a kid from my part of town could buy a slide rule. I got Ds on five-question daily quizzes when I answered one or two questions with hand-scrawled arithmetic, while the kids with slide rules clicked their way to A’s. When I did get a slide rule in twelfth grade I was so far behind, I never figured it out—and there was no one at home who had ever seen such a contraption. (132)

Beyond his teachers, Murray recalls the suffering he experienced at the hands of his classmates, as well. On the playground he felt silenced by his peers—by their religious prejudices and the masculine norms of the day. “Each year of school, from first grade until sixth, I played the role of victim or Christian martyr,” Murray writes (*My Twice-Lived Life* 24). He did so, he explains, because of the repeated violence he experienced at the hands of schoolyard bullies.¹⁸ “Mother had told me that if I truly believed in Jesus Christ, the bully’s

¹⁸ Murray was a Scottish Baptist whereas many of his schoolmates in Quincy, Massachusetts were, as he tells it, Irish-Catholics.

hand would be stayed,” Murray recalls. “I didn’t believe hard enough; the bully’s knuckles connected.” “At school,” he writes, “I hated the classroom and the playground” (*My Twice-Lived Life* 65).

While my focus here is on Murray’s struggles in school, the challenges he faced at home, where he was an only child in a house full of apparently troubled adults, only exacerbated those he experienced at school. “I was a sickly child,” he reports, “brought up in a hell-fire and brimstone house where eternal damnation sat waiting on the back porch, and I started each morning by going in to see if my grandmother, paralyzed by a stroke, had survived the night. My father was not happy with his job, my mother with her lot” (*The Literature of Tomorrow* 226). In his later life, Murray wrote at length about his parents in his columns and memoirs. His father, he explains, was “a hypochondriac all his life, taking to bed with illnesses real and imagined. He was in the retail business, dealing with women’s fashions, and when his buying didn’t match his customer’s purchasing, he would take to his bed” (*My Twice-Lived Life* 64). Murray’s mother, he confesses, “should never have been a mother. She had no talent for it and took no pleasure in it” (11).¹⁹ In a short essay written late in his life, of his relationship with his mother Murray writes, “I cannot have the mother I wanted any more than she could have had the son of her expectations. I still hunger for that one conversation we can never have over a cup of orange pekoe tea at the red checked oilskin kitchen tablecloth and hear her express love for her only and offer respect for our mutual differences” (“Reading What I Haven’t Written” 8).

To escape the suffering he experienced at home and school, Murray immersed himself in work and odd jobs. At his memorial service in 2007 Thomas Newkirk described Murray’s early life as “molded from a Horatio Alger dime novel.” Murray’s own descriptions of his early years only confirm this observation. In a lovely passage in his memoir *The Lively Shadow*, Murray recalls the numerous occupations of his youth:

A morning and afternoon and Sunday paper route; shoveling snow; performing hated yard work; serving as a shabbas [sic] goy the one year we lived in an Orthodox Jewish neighborhood; organizing a real estate office; restoring antiques, cutting wood, and building a chapel during the four summers I was a “scholarship boy” at summer camp; making Scots sausage at Miller’s Market, where I also kept track of canned goods inventory, decorated the store windows, and stacked

19 Murray relates numerous painful anecdotes about his mother in his memoirs, including a story about the time when he returned home from the war to find that, assuming he would die and never return, she had sold or given away his clothing and belongings.

and sold fruit and vegetables, delivering with the store's truck before I had a truck license; serving as chauffeur for the state treasurer while I was in high school; cooking; house painting; unloading the inventory for the first supermarket in my neighborhood; quitting school in the spring of my tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades to work on the Boston Record and American—all showed that getting to work early, running when others walked, and staying late could not earn me love but did produce respect—and money. (127-28)

As this passage suggests, work gave Murray things he could not get from school or at home—self-worth, pride, and meaning. “Work, not religion, was my salvation,” he recalls (*The Lively Shadow* 127). When he wasn't working he pursued the life of the mind, feeding his inexhaustible only-child's curiosity with self-sponsored artistic and literate activity. He was, he writes, “a compulsive reader far beyond my grade level, a child artist, a scholar in my own way of topics that interested me” (*The Lively Shadow* 127). Outside of school, Murray recalls, he was “learning on my own at a mad pace, gulping down a half dozen books or more every week.” He continues:

I cannot remember when I could not read and did not spend part of every day reading. My curiosity took me through the children's shelves of the Wollaston branch library to the adult sections, where I was not supposed to read but did, and on to the huge main Thomas Crane Library in Quincy, Massachusetts, where I started making notes for one of the books I published a lifetime later. I was learning all the time—on the street, at work, at home and church and summer camp—but not in school. (*My Twice Lived Life* 129)

In school, as we have seen, Murray was taught to see himself as *not-a-learner*. “I thought I was stupid” he recalls, and eventually came to accept “the documented fact that I was stupid” even though he “was placed in the highest level of a thirteen-track system because of [his] IQ tests” (*My Twice-Lived Life* 129-32). School was “something to escape” and so, not surprisingly, Murray dropped out of high school twice before eventually failing out in the 12th grade (*My Twice-Lived Life* 133-34). At this point he enrolled at the Tilton School, a private boarding academy in New Hampshire, where he was a “scholarship boy,” his tuition, room, and board paid for by a football scholarship and a job as a resident assistant. After a year at Tilton, Murray graduated and was then drafted into the army where he served in the European theater during World War II.

It was not until he arrived home from war and enrolled as an English major at UNH in the winter of 1946 that Murray finally experienced school in a way that was less about silence and its attendant feelings of embarrassment, humiliation, and shame and more about voice and the feelings which accompany it: pride, empowerment, and a sense of authority. His recollections of his undergraduate years at UNH in the 1940s are imbued with memories of talk, conversation, and dialogue. “Looking back,” he recalls, “I realize how much I was changed by those fast-passing, jam-packed months of reading and writing and talking, always talking” (“To Heck with Nostalgia” 9). While talking was, as Murray recalls, a significant part of the experience at UNH, so was listening, and it was the act of *being listened to* by his professors that seems to have resonated with him the most. “We were learning because our professors were learning with us,” Murray writes, summoning the unique post-war environment in which world-wise veterans forced their way into university classrooms and challenged the authority of their professors. “They didn’t lecture so much as challenge us to read and criticize,” Murray writes. “When we did, they gave us the complement of listening and the greater compliment of counter-attack—heated, personal, and caring. My teachers in Durham taught me to respect and listen to the individual student, to delight in diversity, to be myself and reveal my feelings as well as my opinions honestly” (“To Heck with Nostalgia” 9-10).

While it wasn’t roses all the way down, as we will see in the next section, Murray does seem to have experienced, during his years as an undergraduate English major at UNH, a pedagogy rooted in the importance of listening to and encouraging student autonomy and authority. Most importantly, though, his professors were able to encourage him, after so many years of educational disenfranchisement and alienation, to trust that the things he had to say had value and worth in the world and that he had a right and even an obligation to say them. James A. Herrick, a scholar of the history and theory of rhetoric, has written eloquently about the importance of voice, the danger of silence. “When speech is viewed as the characteristic human capacity, to deny speech by silence is to deny one’s humanity,” he argues (174). Feeling that his humanity had been denied by the teachers of his youth, Donald Murray focused his educational reform efforts once he transitioned to college teaching on working to ensure that the humanity of his students (and future generations of students) would be encouraged, and that their voices would be heard.

ROOTS OF A REFORMER, TAKE II

In the last section, having traced the struggles and challenges Donald Murray reports having experienced in school and at home in his youth, I suggested

that his time as an undergraduate English major at UNH in the 1940s was significant in that he found, in the exuberant classrooms of the early post-war era, professors who allowed him to experience education as a form of empowerment and who listened to and encouraged him to develop and exercise his voice. As we saw above in Murray's 1987 essay "To Heck with Nostalgia," he recalled with enthusiasm and gratitude the "fast-passing, jam-packed months of reading and writing and talking" he experienced at UNH under the leadership of faculty who made such meaningful engagement with schooling and literacy possible. "To Heck with Nostalgia," however, was written for UNH's alumni magazine, where encomiums to professors are the norm and the old alma mater is always cast in a positive light. Elsewhere in Murray's corpus of work and in his archive there is evidence of a more complicated relationship with his UNH mentors or, if not with them, exactly, with what they represented as local instantiations of the mid-twentieth century discipline of English. This second story contains significant implications for understanding Murray and his work, for what has been obscured by the *Donald Murray = Expressivist* frame, or just forgotten entirely, are the many arguments Murray advanced in the field for the disciplinary reform of English as well as the vital role he played in helping the emergent modern field of composition and rhetoric develop and articulate an identity separate from English. If Murray's educational reform efforts were grounded in his childhood experiences of personal and academic struggle and even trauma, his attempts to reform the discipline of English can be traced, in part, to his experiences as an undergraduate English major and, later, faculty member at UNH (in the only college English department he ever knew from the inside). The mid-twentieth century discipline of English as Murray experienced at UNH offered him a vision of the discipline to challenge and push back against *and* a tradition to build on and extend. Once he was in a position to do so as a faculty member, he would pursue both paths.

LIBERAL CULTURE AT "A POOR MAN'S COLLEGE"

As Sharon Crowley has argued, "around 1971" English teachers and scholars in U.S. secondary schools and colleges and universities began to work to reform the way writing was taught within English departments and what we have come to think of as the writing process movement got underway. "A large body of textual evidence attests," Crowley writes, "that a pedagogical turn . . . was widely recommended in professional literature during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s" (187). Crowley sources Murray's 1972 article "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product" to support her claims, but it's important to note that by 1972 Murray had already been working to reform the teaching of English (and

writing within it) for almost a decade, and one of his key arguments, borne out of that experience, actually preceded the claim for teaching process. The warrant for the assertion that teachers of English should teach process not product is the argument that writing is, in the first place, among the sorts of things that *are* teachable and therefore learnable—by all students. This warrant, as Murray well knew, was not one upon which all teachers and professors of English, including his mid-twentieth colleagues at UNH, agreed.

While Murray had obviously gained exposure to English in the many years of his schooling leading up to his enrollment at UNH, his decision to declare his undergraduate major as English signaled an ambition to commit himself more seriously to the discipline. What he could not and likely did not know, however, was that the UNH English Department was, in the very year of his matriculation at the university, 1946, embarking on a new concentrated program of study grounded in what Berlin has dubbed “the rhetoric of liberal culture” (*Rhetoric and Reality* 43). For most of the UNH English Department’s first epoch, which ran from roughly 1912–1946,²⁰ the program in English had been largely pragmatic in nature. Study in English, as one catalogue put it, was seen as a means of “preparation for many varieties of work after college” (*Bulletin 1945-46* 115). In this way, the epoch one English major at UNH was well-suited to students enrolling in what was, to borrow a phrase from the school’s first institutional historian, Donald Babcock, “a poor man’s college” (221). The English curriculum was notable for its diversity, inclusivity, and usefulness—*diverse* in that it included many areas of language study from which students could choose, *inclusive* in that each area counted towards fulfillment of graduation requirements for the major, and *useful* in that the coursework, including classes in literary studies, was designed and marketed to speak to students’ vocational aspirations.

The revision of this pragmatic, student-centered program of study began in earnest in the 1920s and 1930s as the faculty at the New Hampshire College of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts, as of 1923 the University of New Hampshire, began to professionalize. Within English, a cohort of Yale-trained scholars with doctorates in literature began to arrive around this time and quickly got to work reshaping the major.²¹ As Berlin has noted, Yale and Princeton were “the primary

20 The department was founded as the Department of English and Psychology in 1903 but did not take on a clear sense of professional identity until 1912 and 1913 when Dr. Alfred Richards and Mr. Harold Scudder, respectively, joined the faculty. Richards guided the department as chair until his retirement in 1939, at which point Scudder took over, serving until 1946 when he, too, retired. Together, these two men, a Yale Ph.D. trained in philology and a Dartmouth A.B. trained as a newspaperman and public relations specialist, shaped the vision of English at UNH during the department’s first epoch.

21 The association between Yale’s English department and UNH’s can be traced to the arrival on the faculty, in 1911, of Dr. Alfred Richards, who earned his A.B. in English from Yale in 1898.

centers” of liberal culture in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries (*Rhetoric and Reality* 72). As such, and to varying degrees, faculty who received their training at these institutions carried with them the liberal culture ethos as they ventured out to less well-heeled colleges and universities to spread the liberal culture project and instill in their charges an education that was “aristocratic and humanistic,” while immersing them in “traditional learning of literature, language, and art” (*Rhetoric and Reality* 43). The goal, as Berlin reminds us, was the production of a particular kind of subjectivity, that of an “aristocrat who demonstrated his education through living a certain kind of life” (*Rhetoric and Reality* 39).

The ways in which faculty trained at schools like Yale and Princeton worked to impose the liberal culture project on students at schools like UNH can be glimpsed in the changes initiated in the UNH English Department in the 1930s and 1940s. These began in earnest in 1935, when prerequisite courses for the major, which had previously focused equally on writing, reading, and speaking, were re-oriented to center *only* on literary study (*Bulletin 1935-36* 161-62). It continued in 1939, when the English Department abolished the freshman composition program and allowed students who earned a sufficient score on a writing entrance examination to proceed directly to coursework in literature (those who didn’t score high enough were enrolled in remedial tutorials in basic composition)²² (Scudder, “A Functional” 413-15; Scudder & Webster, “The New Hampshire Plan” 493-95). And it reached its zenith in 1946 when Dr. Sylvester Bingham, himself a Yale man, ascended to department chair and oversaw the creation of a new English curriculum which foregrounded the study of literature and liberal culture as “understanding and appreciation of the thought of the great minds of the past” (*Bulletin 1945-46* 98-99). An exit examination tied to graduation was instituted at this time, as well, to test students’ understanding and appreciation of the western literary and cultural tradition. In sum, if, during the UNH English Department’s first epoch, the English major was student-centered, with faculty allowing *students* to decide what a degree in English entailed, during the department’s second epoch, which I pin to the years 1946–1968, it was *faculty* who determined what the study of English would involve and it would involve, principally, the study of western literature and liberal culture.²³

22 Freshman English was re-established a half-dozen years later, in 1946, as part of a general education revision, under the leadership of chairman Sylvester Bingham.

23 This top-down, faculty-centered program of study eventually created strains for the department as students began to shy away from the major. In the eyes of department chair Bingham, however, the cause of the drop in the number of English majors was more the result of the mediocre caliber of students being admitted to the university. “If plans are not made now for the raising of admission requirements or, at least, the enforcement of the present ones,” Bingham complains in a memo to the liberal arts dean in the summer of 1958, “the University will be inundated with mediocrity” (Bingham).

THE MAKING OF A “WRITER’S UNIVERSITY”

While the teaching of writing within the mainstream of the English curriculum at UNH during the post-war years was subordinated to the teaching of literature and liberal culture a different tradition existed in the extracurriculum, one which placed writing of the “creative” sort (and its teaching), at the discipline’s center. As Katherine Tirabassi has shown in her award-winning dissertation, beginning in the 1930s and under the charismatic leadership of Dr. Carroll Towle, UNH became, through several inspired extracurricular initiatives, a “writer’s university.” Like Dr. Bingham and other members of the epoch two faculty, Towle received his doctorate from Yale, where he studied sixteenth and seventeenth century British literature. He began to teach writing classes at UNH shortly after his arrival in 1931,²⁴ creating his long-running and much memorialized course, *Writing as an Art*, in 1935, described thus in the UNH *Bulletin* that year:

A course in the study and practice of the forms of writing through an examination of the history of literary criticism. The reading of famous critical essays and of many contemporary opinions, correlated with practice writing of various types. Each student is allowed to spend much of his time with the type he finds most congenial. (*Bulletin 1935-36* 166-67)

As D. G. Myers has argued, instruction in creative writing of the sort Towle offered at UNH in the 1930s was typical of its era, having recently emerged in U.S. schools and colleges and universities as an alternative to more culturally or humanistically-oriented approaches to the teaching of English. Over time, *Writing as an Art* narrowed its focus to center less on the consumption of “famous and critical essays” and more on the production of writing that students found “most congenial.” Here, for example, is a description of the course from 1946, the year Murray took it with Towle:

The study and practice of forms of writing, together with an examination of the history of literary philosophy. Practice in mutual criticism through class workshop discussions and written comment. Freedom in selection and pursuance of writing interests. Individual conferences. (*Bulletin 1945-46* 212)

As we learn from Tirabassi, Towle was the driving force behind the rich extracurricular writing culture that existed at UNH from the late 1930s until his

24 Dr. Claude Lloyd first offered instruction in creative writing at UNH in the 1920s in his course on the short story. Towle picked up the mantle of this work following Lloyd’s departure in the early 1930s. (*Bulletin 1928-29*, 142)

sudden death in 1962 (one year, it's worth noting, before Murray returned to join the faculty). Most significantly Towle was the founder and director of the UNH Summer Writer's Conference (1938–1962), which was ranked among the “Big Four” such conferences nationally (Tirabassi 175). Held each August and attracting more than 100 writers and writing teachers from around the country, the conference was unique in that it was open to a wide range of participants and not just practicing or professional writers. As successful as it was, however, Towle argued that the conference did not so much *create* UNH's writing reputation as it built on and extended it. By the time the first conference was held in 1938, UNH students had already been publishing a successful literary journal, *The Student Writer*, and winning regional and national writing competitions for almost a decade.

Students and UNH community members were also able to engage in UNH's rich extracurricular writing culture during these years via participation in a home-grown initiative sponsored by Towle, The Folio Club, an informal gathering of students, teachers, and professional writers who met at Towle's home in Durham to discuss writing. At Folio Club meetings participants shared and critiqued one another's work and read and discussed contemporary American literature, which was, at this time, only just beginning to gain a foothold in the mainstream of the curriculum in the UNH English Department. In sum, from the student literary journal to the annual writer's conference, from writing prizes to the Folio Club, UNH came to be, during the pre- and post-war years, an important site in the practice, teaching, and cultivation of (creative) writing and Dr. Towle was instrumental in this process, championing, in Tirabassi's words, “The notion that student writers should be considered as potential contributors to the emergent contemporary American literary sensibility” (132).

As we saw in the second description of Writing as an Art, above, and as we learn from accounts of Towle's teaching in the campus newspaper, he engaged in a range of progressive pedagogies that would soon become staples of “process” pedagogy (e.g., providing students with the chance to explore and experiment with different genres of writing, allowing students to choose their own topics, encouraging students to develop and improve their work through an iterative revision process, creating opportunities for students to share work-in-progress with peers). At a time when some in the UNH English Department believed that writing was the result of inspired genius and therefore largely unteachable, Towle worked to create an egalitarian teaching and learning environment in which any student could learn what he called “the art of expression in language” (*An Anthology* vi-vii). Here, for example, is Towle in the student newspaper circa 1941, guiding students in submitting work for the annual *Atlantic Monthly* writing contests (numerous UNH students won these contests, including Donald Murray):

In view of the fine opportunities offered and the comparative success of New Hampshire writers in the past, I urge everyone who thinks that he possesses any ability [in writing] to give serious attention to the thought of contributing one or more entries [to this year's contests]. I shall be glad to talk with or assist anyone in putting his manuscript in readiness for competition. ("Literary Contests" 4)

As this passage illustrates, Dr. Towle welcomed all comers to the writer's table. Of his inclusive pedagogical approach, Tirabassi, who studied his papers extensively, writes,

Although some of the [writing] initiatives [under Towle] had some small requirement to gain access . . . most . . . placed few restrictions, if any, on membership or participation. In all cases, the themes and topics discussed focused on the present moment—offering participants an opportunity to create, to write, to discuss writing-in-process with peers, professors, and published writers, to provide feedback to other writers, to study popular culture, and to read texts that were not yet "appropriate" in the formal curriculum. The emphasis on informality, open access and contemporary themes seem to be features that differentiate these initiatives from the formal curriculum at UNH. (166)

In sum, in the extracurriculum at UNH during the middle years of the 20th century Dr. Carroll Towle established an alternative tradition of English upon which Donald Murray and others could and would later build. It was a tradition that existed largely outside of the department's central disciplinary vision but existed, nonetheless, gaining for UNH a reputation in the production and teaching of (creative) writing. When Murray became a faculty member at UNH in the early sixties, he very much saw himself as working within this tradition, as he explains in the following passage:

New Hampshire was for me a place of teachers and learning and books and writing, especially writing. I joined a community of men and women who were writers, or who dreamed of being writers. . . . Now, on some days Carroll Towle's son, David, sits across my desk talking about his writing as I sit across his father's desk talking about my writing. . . .

Most mornings I sit at my desk looking out at New Hampshire woods trying to do what my teachers taught me. Most

afternoons I meet with my students trying to pass on my teachers' lessons of craft. New Hampshire has become more than a place; it is a way of working which gives me a personal sense of continuity—lessons taught and lessons continually learned. ("City Boy Finds Woods" A31)

CONCLUSION

Why would a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer who had successfully placed articles and stories in the most-well known publications of his day and who had published two novels and had a third under contract decide, over the span of just a few years, to throw virtually all of his prodigious energy behind an unanticipated new mission? My answer to this question has been my argument in this chapter: Donald Murray's efforts to reform schools were grounded in his frustrated childhood of educational struggle and failure. His work trying to reform the field of English was rooted in his feelings of frustration and even anger about the way writing and its teaching was marginalized within the discipline as he had experienced it at UNH. While I have never found evidence that Murray consciously set out to pursue reform as a primary goal prior to his return to UNH in 1963, once drawn into a reform current during his early years in the classroom Murray swam with the tide, and kept swimming with it, for the rest of his life. Having examined, in this chapter, the personal forces driving Murray's reform project(s), the *why* of his reform, I turn, now, to investigate its *how*, sharing what I've learned about the numerous efforts Murray made to change both English and the schools in which it was taught during the second half of his career.