

ONE O'CLOCK JUMP

JOSEPH F. TRIMMER

For the week before I taught my first composition class, I was tormented by a recurring nightmare. I dreamed that, even though I knew nothing about music, I was about to play drums for Count Basie's orchestra. I never knew how I got into this situation, but each night, as I climbed to my seat behind the set of drums and cymbals, I told myself I could fake it. Perched atop my red-velvet stool, surveying the tiers of musicians below me, I was seduced by the glamor and power of my position. I was sure that with a little ingenuity I could figure out what to do before the gig began.

I determined quickly that the footpeddles would be my biggest problem. I would have to depress the right one, for the bass drum, and then the left one, for the trap-cymbals, in alternating rhythmic patterns. Then, while my feet peddled furiously below me, I would have to establish yet another set of alternating cadences with the sticks in each hand. The curtain was still down, so I tapped and pumped a few times, very softly. I knew what I was supposed to do, but it was difficult to make my hands and feet maintain their four interdependent movements. If I had to concentrate this hard simply to keep everything going, how was I ever going to keep one eye on the charts, one eye on the Count, and play cool?

No more time for questions. The curtain was parting, the audience was applauding madly beyond the footlights, and the Count was assuming his position behind the piano. He raised his left hand, looked at me, and then with his right hand struck the first few notes of "One O'Clock Jump." For the first several bars, everything went fine — my feet were pumping, my hands were flying, I was swinging. Suddenly the key, the tempo, something changed. I lost a beat with my right foot and tried desperately to reclaim it by doubling beats with my left foot. Then, as I searched for the rim of the

Joseph F. Trimmer is Director of the Writing Program and
Professor of English at Ball State University.

snare with my right stick, I missed the cymbal with my left. My panic was producing so much confusion that I hardly noticed when the band stopped for my eight-bar solo. My feet and hands began to flail frantically now in all directions, and, as I reached after the stick that flew out of my left hand, I was air-born, crashing through the cymbals, tumbling over the snare, and twisting and turning toward the upraised and outraged faces of the trombone section. End of dream.

The ingredients of that nightmare — the need to perform, the fear of discovery, the inability to will confusion into order — are stock elements in what has been called the “middle-class nightmare.” Night after night, in bedrooms throughout America, men and women toss and turn in their beds as they try to answer questions on textbooks they did not study, recite lines in a play they did not read, or deliver a speech on a subject they do not recognize.

From my past experience, I would submit that those who toss and turn the most are TAs. And when you consider their plight, it is a wonder that they sleep at all. As young adults, they were avid readers, rapidly absorbing the sentence patterns of the language almost by osmosis. They imitated these patterns in their own writing, only dimly aware that they were adhering to a complex set of rules and principles. As undergraduates, their admirable but essentially unconscious literacy allowed them to place out of the freshman composition course and begin the formal study of literature and the liberal arts. Wherever they went it was the same: the few writing tricks they figured out on their own allowed them to fake it. But once they became TAs, they couldn't fake it any longer. They were assigned a ten week solo in a course they never took, a subject they never studied, a discipline whose interrelated rules appeared as enigmatic and inscrutable as those which governed the workings of the stock exchange.

What to do? When I was a TA, there were no pre-semester workshops in the teaching of writing. There were no graduate courses in composition. We were simply given the books, a room number, and a seating chart. At one o'clock every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I had one simple goal: to get through the hour without crashing into the trombones. At nine o'clock and ten o'clock on those same days, I was on the other side of the desk, a student, writing papers for Earl Johnson's seminar in Swift and Pope and Jonathan Frederick's seminar in *The Romantic Imagination*. For

awhile it seemed that the lessons I was learning at nine o'clock and ten o'clock, though different from one another in style and substance, might help me through my one o'clock jump.

The Earl, as he was privately dubbed by his respectful and wary students, was a reserved and courtly man who was convinced that there was no human theory for which there was more conclusive evidence than the doctrine of original sin. Error was everywhere, and we could not expect to eradicate all of it, but if we were modest in our expectations, disciplined in our behavior, and precise about our beliefs, we could expect to eliminate some of it.

English 586 was the tidy garden where the Earl tended the virtues of discipline and precision. His tools were a red pen, a copy of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, and six two-page assignments on exacting topics. To the unsuspecting, these assignments seemed harmless enough, but to the knowledgeable — to those who had tapped the grad-school grapevine — a two-pager for the Earl was recognized for what it was: a request for absolute perfection.

The Earl believed (and I knew he believed Swift and Pope believed) that correct language, like good manners and proper attire, was a matter of morality. In writing, there were many explicit "Thou Shalts" and "Thou Shalt Nots" (commonly known as rules of grammar) and many more implicit "Dos" and "Don'ts" (commonly known as matters of style). Our job, as writers, was to learn these commandments and then have the good taste to follow them. His job, as editor, was to identify our sins. On those mornings when a two-page essay was due, a short paragraph from Strunk and White appeared on the board as a reminder of the purpose of our endeavor:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

When the Earl returned our papers, he was always polite — a gentleman is always polite. But we could tell that he was not happy about finding more evidence for his favorite theory. We had tried, but we had not tried hard enough. If our organization was solid, our diction was fuzzy. If our logic was cogent (his favorite word), our syntax was shoddy. He

questioned the accuracy and integrity of everything on each page. And it was not surprising to find at the bottom of the second page a request for a complete revision.

At nine o'clock on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I learned that I could not fake it. Writing was not figuring out a few tricks, but mastering an exacting craft. There were proper procedures to be followed. Learning these procedures and applying them correctly in a territory as limited as two pages took enormous concentration and discipline. But if I was steadfast, if I demanded as much from myself as the Earl demanded from his classes, the product I produced would be worthy of my effort. I learned something else at ten o'clock.

Jonathan (he insisted on the use of first names) was a congenial and gregarious man who seemed, to us at least, to be seeing everything for the first time. His interests and enthusiasms seemed inexhaustible. The world was full of incandescent wonders awaiting discovery. It was our luck to be alive and our duty to recreate the world in words.

Jonathan's seminar in *The Romantic Imagination* was a natural forum for these ideas. Pacing back and forth in front of the class (his luminous eyes, disheveled hair, and resonant voice commanding our astonished attention), he would chant the cardinal virtues of the romantic faith: Keats — "What the imagination seizes as beauty must be true;" Wordsworth — "All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings;" and Blake — "Energy is eternal delight."

Jonathan's attitude toward writing, and by extension toward all writers, both poets and students, was reverence. He was fascinated by the creative process, the curious means by which a vague notion was identified by casual observation, incubated in the unconscious, shaped and modified by the imagination, and embodied in and verified by language. His writing assignments, unlike the Earl's restricted topics, were at best oblique. His explicit requirement was that we examine the workings of the romantic imagination in a poet of our choice. His implicit requirement was that we examine the workings of the creative process in ourselves even as we analyzed the operations of that process in Coleridge or Shelley.

Unlike the Earl, Jonathan never returned our essays *en masse* but scheduled individual conferences with each of us. He would begin these sessions by conveying his high regard

for what we had attempted to create. How did we happen to select this particular subject? Where did the idea come from? How did it develop? What problems did we have to solve? Why did we select this particular pattern of organization, this piece of primary evidence, this scholarly authority? Did the process of writing an essay on the workings of the creative process teach us anything about the birth, growth, and maturation of ideas? The questions were endless and so were the comments about the possibility for revision. These were not direct commandments, like the Earl's, but indirect suggestions growing out of our mutual investigation of a piece of writing. It was clear that if changes were to be made, they would cost him as much pain and difficulty as they would cost us — that indeed, the changes were being suggested only to bring a masterpiece from near perfection to perfection.

Thus, at ten o'clock every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I learned that writing was more than perfecting a product. It was a complex and fascinating process that evolved through several equally complex and fascinating stages. Each of these stages — preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification — was worth studying. And, if in my own writing, I paid attention to the subtle developments in each stage and to the points of passage from stage to stage, I could uncover elements of the art of composition. By eleven o'clock each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, Jonathan had revolutionized my thinking about writing, thinking which I was confident had been firmly in place when I left the Earl's class at ten. Indeed, I learned that when I considered writing a craft (as the Earl did) I saw one subject, and when I considered writing an art (as Jonathan obviously did) I saw another. The hard question — the question I asked each day as I prepared for my one o'clock jump — was, which was the right subject?

Anyone who has studied the history of composition will recognize that the Earl and Jonathan represent two distinct stages in the development of that discipline. In 1874, the members of the faculty at Harvard College were so concerned about the declining verbal skills of their students that they introduced a required course in freshman rhetoric. The emphasis in that course (and in most of the courses that have been modeled after it) was the acceptable and correct use of the English language. Catchwords such as "barbarism," "gross illiteracy," and "grammatical purity" domin-

ated these courses, suggesting the degree to which a student was held accountable for even the slightest stylistic deviation. In such classes, writing was assigned, students wrote, teachers graded, and students, occasionally, would rewrite. Instruction in writing usually amounted to an explanation, after the fact, of error:

Avoid starting a sentence with *however* when the meaning is 'nevertheless.' The word usually serves better when not in the first position.

Writing teachers, some patient and courteous like the Earl, others irascible and belligerent, became subjects of folklore on every college campus in America: "Don't try to fake it in ol' evil eye's class. He'll nail you every time."

The trouble with this approach to teaching was that while it convinced students to avoid errors, it did not improve the overall quality of their writing. Or so thought many of the people who, in 1946, formed the Conference on Collegiate Composition and Communication. Stated simply, the CCCC was organized to begin "the most extensive and concerted frontal attack ever made on the problems of teaching college freshman English." Over the last four decades, the CCCC (and its official journal *College Composition and Communication*) has been the clearing house for most of the important revolutions in the teaching of writing. Some of these revolutions have been prompted by discoveries in linguistics, others by the re-examination of rhetoric. In all cases, the effect on the teaching of writing has been the same: instruction in proofreading has been replaced by analysis of the writing process. The new rhetoricians believe that the teaching of writing should include instruction in all the stages of the process, not merely instruction in the teacher's system of evaluation. And so each year, near the end of March, in the hallways of some hotel in a convention city, one can hear the new catchwords reverberate: "tagmemic," "heuristic," and "holistic."

On a larger scale, the *process* versus *product* controversy is simply another version of the age-old conflict between the romantic and classical imaginations. The *romantic* views the classicist as unimaginative, inflexible, and intolerant — chained by his own choice to a static, or at least enervating vision of existence. By contrast, the romantic sees himself as a reformer, a prophet of energy, liberation, and integration. The *classicist* views the romantic as impractical, undisciplined, and indefinite — deluded by his

visions into the mistaken belief that problems which are from eternity can be solved with the latest countersign. By contrast, the classicist sees himself as a realist, a spokesman for reason, precision, and order.

During my first semester as a TA, I did not have time to develop this big picture, to see how the Earl and Jonathan figured in the history of composition and the history of ideas. Between eleven o'clock and one o'clock, I had time to develop only two conclusions: 1) I was totally confused — absolutely torn between two contending theories of writing; and 2) I would have to choose one theory or crack up. Every day, the nine o'clock/ten o'clock controversy carried over into my one o'clock class. If I devoted class time to a discussion of intransitive verbs, I could hear Jonathan's voice urging me to take up a real subject such as invention. If I devoted class time to invention, I could hear the Earl's disapproving sigh — "Would a real writer even utter the word heuristic?"

My confusion lasted only as long as I was committed to the notion that I would have to choose or crack. One Friday, after my one o'clock jump, as I roamed the stacks thinking about crashing cymbals and upraised trombones, I came across a book by F. Scott Fitzgerald entitled *The Crack-Up*. In the mood for disasters, I casually thumbed the pages. Suddenly, a sentence jumped at me:

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.

I read the passage again. There was my solution. I did not have to choose between one theory or another. I simply had to keep them both going while I kept jumping — functioning. My fear of discovery, my need to will confusion into order, had almost forced me to be most assertive when I was least certain. I did not know enough to teach writing as the ultimate craft or the sublime art. And I certainly did not know enough to work out a satisfactory synthesis of those two opposed ideas. But I did know something about the difficulties of beginning writers. I was an expert on that kind of confusion.

The course finally clicked in my head. We were all writers — students, teachers. We all labored under the same conditions — the disorder of our experience, the incoherence of our thoughts, the imprecision of our language. And

each time we wrote, the challenge of a new subject created new conditions. There were so many things to keep going at once. You had to invent a subject, assess the audience, and establish a thesis. You had to develop a plan, select the evidence, and create a persona. You had to shape paragraphs, craft sentences, and, pick words. Sometimes you had to think about the process — the creation and verification of an idea. Other times you had to think only about the product — the selection and placement of an adverb. Timing was everything. You had to maintain and monitor so many different rhythms. *Writing was like playing the drums.*

My nightmare had been an omen, but I had read it wrong. The point was not to fake it but to flaunt it. We were all apprentices in the world of writing. My job was not so much to *teach* my students the ultimate craft or the sublime art as to *learn* with them. And maybe, just maybe, if we could keep things jumping at one o'clock, we would all swing.