WRITING IN THE LITERATURE CLASS

MICHAEL WENTWORTH

None of us would deny the value of writing in the literature class, though I sense, on the basis of those writing situations that we characteristically present our students, that we often simply assume an inherent value in writing about motives for Hamlet's delay or symbolism in Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. I further sense that more often than not, the rationale, when and if there is one, for such assignments ignores the fact that many of our students are neither experienced nor sophisticated readers. It is hardly surprising in this regard that students often circumvent a direct response to topics of the sort mentioned above by retelling the story, the poem, the novel, or the play in question—that is, by rewriting the text in their own personal idiom. How do we prevent such a familiar evasion tactic or equally ineffective written responses that completely miss the point of a particular text or that merely paraphrase what was said in class? It might be instructive, by way of response, to turn briefly to current research in the teaching of writing. Much current composition theory views writing as a process involving a series of related, frequently recursive stages usually designated as pre-writing, writing, and revising. Ideally, as a result of consciously working through these stages the student will discover, define, shape, and ultimately consolidate some personal meaning in response to a particular topic that, in most cases, was not directly apparent at the outset of the writing process. One of the key assumptions in process theory is that meaning, rather than the fortuitous consequence of divine intervention, evolves through a series of successive stages, each of which incorporates its own immediate problem-solving tasks. One of the psychological advantages of such an approach to writing is that students realize a more conscious control of their writing together with a greater assurance in their performative capabilities as writers—hardly an inconsiderable advantage since many beginning writers are inexperienced and thus understandably dread the prospect of writing.

It is both mistaken and shortsighted to assume that the inexperienced reader is any more sophisticated or self-assured than the inexperienced writer or that the meaning of a poem or short story, upon initial contact, is any more apparent than the personal meaning of a student essay before it is written or even first conceived. It would seem reasonable to assume then that such written assignments as we provide our students in the literature class should be so designed as to accommodate the student-reader's discovery of meaning and, further, should ensure to as great an extent as possible the prerogative of the individual reader to discover or negotiate such meaning on his or her own terms. One problem with the usual approach to written assignments in the literature class is that such assignments are assigned "after the fact"—that is, following an in-class discussion of the literary text under consideration. As a result, that process of self-negotiated meaning mentioned above is often violated by informational static, or interference, extraneous to what, initially at any rate, should have been the student's possibly mistaken and idiosyncratic but nonetheless ingenuous response to the text. In addition, such assignments allow the student but a single opportunity to respond in whatever designated fashion to a particular text, thereby frustrating the possibility of revisory assessment, for, like the writing process, the reading process when purposively motivated and directed, incorporates its own characteristic editing and revising activities.

In view of such limitations, one obvious alternative to the way we typically have students write about literature would be to increase the number of opportunities we ordinarily provide our students to respond to a particular text. The underlying assumption of such a proposal is that the student-reader's discovery of meaning can be effectively realized through a variety of strategically structured response situations that would, for example, orient the reader to a particular text, provoke an initial response to that text, allow for the possible amplification and likely revision of the reader's initial response, and, finally, provide for a more focused discussion of any of the reader's preceding responses. Regarding the content and sequential arrangement of such written responses, it might be helpful, once again, to turn to the composition classroom. The organization of most current—and, in fact, most traditional—rhetorics would seem to encourage a movement from self-oriented discourse situations such as personal narrative and description to more abstract expository and argumentative situations. In this regard, it is easier

for most students to relate an embarrassing experience than to define embarrassment. Obviously, then, it makes more sense in the beginning writing course to teach narration before definition or, more generally, to so structure written assignments as to allow for the progressive development of the student's analytical capabilities. The same can be said for the structuring of written responses to a particular text in the literature class. Instead of presenting students with only a single opportunity to respond in writing to a particular text, and, more often than not, a response that is essentially analytical in nature, it makes more sense to have students build toward such an assignment by working through a number of shorter, informal assignments arranged in order of increasing complexity. In this respect, the pedagogical effectiveness of the literature instructor would, to a large extent, depend upon his or her ingenuity and resourcefulness in conceiving and plotting appropriate response situations. While I would hardly presume to prescribe the type or the number of such responses for any given text, I can describe a number of preliminary and final response assignments that have proven effective in my own literature classes. Though most of these assignments originated in lower-division courses, they might be used to equal advantage in advanced literature courses.

I frequently tell my students that literature proceeds from and thereby reflects human experience. Many students, however, read so quickly and casually that they read right over, under, or around the human experience dealt with in a piece of literature. I have also found that students are often critical and intolerant of the way characters act and behave in fiction and drama as if such characters, since entirely fictional, hardly warrant or deserve the sympathy and understanding of the reader; as if such judgmental evaluations of a particular character's behavior as "That was a stupid thing to do" or "She should have known better" weren't in fact applicable to the reader's own past behavior. When teaching William Carlos Williams' "The Use of Force," for example, I invariably find that some students are outraged by the doctor's overpowering of the small girl. Of course, the doctor in Williams' story does lose his temper and, when decontextualized, his anger is reprehensible. But the doctor is bothered by his use of force and bothered to such an extent that he tries to explain, in reasonably objective fashion, what he has done and to understand why he has done it. The doctor, as it turns out, is not a brute, but a responsible and, it would seem, ordinarily a rational person who finds himself in one of those familiar no-win

situations in which he finally acts, or reacts, out of character. These, of course, are all-important considerations and vital to an understanding of the story, but they are considerations which escape the attention of those students who are all too willing to cast stones. To provide for a more incisive understanding of the doctor's predicament, the last time I taught the story, I asked the students to relate a previous experience when they had lost their temper and to identify both the occasion and the consequences of the incident. I further specified that they should spend no more than half an hour on their narratives and that I was not so much interested in mechanics, sentence structure, or even organization as I was in content. Since I assigned the narrative before assigning the story, students had no idea about the purpose of the assignment. The next class, students shared their responses in small groups and discovered that anger was a common human emotion and, further, that their individual scenarios followed a similar pattern. After discussing their responses, I went ahead and assigned the Williams story for the next class, but without, as yet, establishing the relevance of their own written responses to the story. In discussing the story the next class meeting, I found that students had established the relevance for themselves. I didn't have to say a word. It was equally, if not even more satisfying, to discover that students were almost unanimously sensitive to the doctor's predicament and, further, that most students felt that the occasion for their own anger was, compared to that of the doctor, rather petty and inconsequential. The response situation I presented my students, though unremarkable enough in itself, nonetheless established, before the fact, an affective correlation between the individual student's experience and that of the doctor and thereby led the student to a greater understanding of the doctor's dilemma and his response to that dilemma than most likely would have followed from a cursory reading of the story. Also, as a straightforward narrative, the assignment could have served as the basis for more objective, analytical response situations. For example, I could have asked my students to compare their own experience with that of the doctor and to draw any appropriate conclusions or to write a free response to the story and on the basis of small group discussions to revise their responses or somehow synthesize the responses of other group members, focusing upon essential points of agreement and disagreement. Most significantly, however, the original response situation established what I previously described as an affective correlation between the student's own experience

and the doctor's experience in the story. Such a correlation, especially in the case of inexperienced readers, can be crucial not only to the discovery of what a poem or a story means but to an appreciation and understanding of the humanizing value of literature since the experiences and perceptions of others often assume meaning or value only when seen in relation to our own.

I have found other types of simple, straightforward response situations equally helpful in engaging the reader's contact and interaction with a text. Occasionally, I ask my students to write a newspaper account of the events in a story since they sometimes don't know—and are cowed into silence by their presumed ignorance—what literally happens in a story as a result of which any intelligent consideration of the significance of what does happen is automatically stillborn. Similarly, I sometimes have students "translate" lyric poems such as Dickinson's "I like to see it lap the Miles" or Williams' "This Is Just to Say" into prose and often to revealing and, on occasion, even startling effect since poetry, by the very nature of its elliptical and frequently non-narrative content, invites unquestioned assumptions that are generally situated within some narrative construct of the reader's own invention. For some reason, it is difficult to accept a series of poetic impressions on their own terms without constructing a narrative context within which they are voiced or played out.

Though student-readers may not always be critical in an analytical sense, they are, as previously mentioned, often critical in a judgmental sense of what characters in a story, a novel, or a play say and do. In teaching fiction, I often capitalize upon this tendency by placing the student in a hypothetical situation that directly invokes a judgmental response of some kind. In teaching Poe's "The Black Cat," for example, I have asked students to assume the role of jury members and, on the basis of the narrator's testimony, to reach some verdict as to his guilt and to consider the possibility of insanity as an extenuating circumstance. I then ask students to write out their verdict, together with appropriate evidence, to justify their decisions. The role-playing in this particular instance is well-suited to the story since the narrator directly invites the cooperation of "some intellect . . . which will reduce my phantasm to the commonplace." The present role-playing situation also forces the student to consider more closely the evidence in a story which, more often than not, is read only for its special effects and sensational subject matter with little if any attention being given to the crux of

the story's meaning: the reliability of the narrator's testimony. The principal advantage of role-playing is that the implication of the student within a text often encourages a closer reading than would otherwise have been the case. In addition, when a particular role-playing situation is accompanied by a written response, or written verdict in the case of "The Black Cat," such a response may serve, once again, as the basis for a more formal, objective response.

On the basis of the preceding examples, writing about literature need not be limited to a single response (usually cast in the form of a critical essay), but might begin with such preliminary responses as a personal reminiscence, a newspaper story, a written court verdict, or, though unmentioned, an obituary, a police or insurance report, or a written settlement in a property or child custody hearing. In some cases, it can be instructive to simply have students formulate a series of questions in response to a particular text. However, instead of merely having students list questions, I have found it more useful, once again, to invent a pretext for such questions. For example, I often have students interview characters within a story, a novel, or a play. Generally, I will divide the class into small groups, the size of which will depend upon the number of characters to be interviewed, and will assign a particular character to each group member who during the next class is interviewed by other members of the group. Thus each group member assumes the double role of interviewer and interviewee. I inform students that they are free to devise questions to which they may or may not have the answers and further specify that their questions may extend beyond the formal conclusion of the text. Thus, during the course of interviewing "Ozzie" in Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews," one student queried, "What happened to you when you got home that evening? Did your mother hit you or what?" This is a perfectly sensible and intelligent question since it bears directly upon the quality of the conversion process enforced by Ozzie toward the end of the story immediately before he jumps from the roof of the synagogue into the firemen's net below. Of course, if students can interview fictional characters or, in the case of poetry, fictional speakers, they should be able to interview authors as well, and within, once again, an appropriate hypothetical setting whether those authors are living or dead is entirely immaterial.

Though the writing situations described thus far are preliminary and essentially informal in nature, the resulting responses, upon further consideration and a corresponding restriction of focus, might

conceivably culminate in a final, more formal response. In fact, when assigning final response situations, I generally present students with a number of conventional topics that require a formal analysis of the text(s) in question. At the same time, however, I provide students with a number of less conventional topics, the nature and purpose of which are usually determined by the text(s) to be discussed or by a recent topic of class discussion. In the past, for example, I have given students the option of staging an interview with a character five to ten years beyond the conclusion of a particular text or, similarly, to write a sequel to a particular story, novel, or play that once again is projected five to ten years beyond the conclusion of the text itself. Such projected responses can be particularly challenging (and just as analytically demanding as a critical essay) since I require students to base their projections upon circumstances within the original text. I have also found on the basis of their episodic structure that certain texts lend themselves to the invention of additional episodes. Thus, when teaching such works as *Candide*, *Don Quixote*, or *Huckleberry Finn*, I have given students the opportunity to write additional episodes that play true to the larger context of the original work or to invent an episode beyond the context of the work itself whereby the original characters are resituated in another time and another place. One of the more memorable student papers I've read resituated Candide and Pangloss in a dormitory on the campus of the University of Kansas where they eventually discover, much to their regret, that, contrary to their initial assumptions, theirs is hardly the "best of all possible residence halls." In fact, in devising their episodes, students often tend to resituate characters within a more familiar environment—a college dormitory, as in the paper just mentioned, or a popular bar off campus, or a protest rally—and beyond the frequently humorous consequences, I find it particularly gratifying to read such accounts since such a process of recontextualization serves to domesticate the work in question and, further, allows the student to test or play out the value system of that work within a more personal, comfortable setting. Such a process can also lead to a confirmation of the enduring quality and universality of the work itself. As alternatives to more conventional final responses, it can be equally instructive to have students retell a particular story from a different point of view; to rewrite the conclusion to a story or novel, or to delete or modify a crucial plot detail or possibly introduce a new detail altogether and then chart the likely outcome of events; to stage a particular scene from a play, attend-

ing to such details as costume, make-up, lighting, music, and stage props; or to have students ask their friends to read a particularly intriguing story and to compare, on the basis of a set of predetermined criteria, the resulting responses.

Over the preceding pages, I have focused upon preliminary and final response situations in the literature class. However, nearly all of the preliminary assignments could serve as the basis for an intermediate or, possibly, even a final response. Nor should the final response situations described be perceived as necessarily final in nature. Depending upon the character of the text and the instructor's intentions, any of these final response assignments might just as easily, and effectively, serve as the occasion for preliminary or intermediate responses. The key here is the instructor's development of a protean flexibility, an existentialist openness to the possibilities of the given moment. Such an attitude is equally crucial in determining the number, type, and, when called for, the sequential ordering of written responses to a particular text. In some cases, a single, preliminary response may seem sufficient. In other cases, additional responses may seem appropriate. Still again, since few of us have the time or energy to assign and evaluate daily responses, it would be necessary to limit not only the number of responses to a particular text, but, further, to limit the number of texts themselves to which we have students respond. What finally matters, in a very determinate sense, is that students respond in some written fashion and with some measure of frequency to the literature they read and that the content and arrangement of such responses allow for a productive, self-negotiated interaction between the student-reader and the text.

Michael Wentworth is a member of the English department at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.