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Spring 2005

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Portnoy, Jeffrey, "Intimations of Imitation: Honors Students and their Alps" (2005). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 158.

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JEFFREY A. PORTNOY

Intimations of Imitation: Honors Students and their Alps

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Joan Digby's "The Age of Imitation" reads like Joan herself: shrewd, provocative, and astute in her observations. I found her remarks compelling on both the personal and professional level as I think about the current generation of students and the society in which we move.

The dialectic between the Romantic poets and the Augustans was one that I traversed. As an undergraduate English major in the late 60s and early 70s, I found in the Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth and Coleridge, voices within the canon that resonated with my sense of the world at the time and the profound mysteries of life. (Of course, Shakespeare is always the exception to everything, even for the eighteenth century). I didn't need no stinking professors with badges to plumb the depths of *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* or *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*. (Ah, yes, the certitude of youth.) Wordsworth and Coleridge—like Dylan, Hendrix, and Morrison—were not speaking, lying actually, from the Nixon White House. Their message was soulful, cosmic, intense, inward, transcendent. I suspect that Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats played no small part in inspiring me to remain engaged with literature and ultimately to attend graduate school after several years in the business world.

How ironic then that graduate school found me immersed in the literature of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century. The closest I came to a course on the Romantics was studying Austen and Blake, two authors claimed by both sides of the sensibility divide. The appeal was probably twofold. I came to understand how to write and by extension perhaps how to read à la Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*. As masters of their craft, few can compete with the luminaries of the eighteenth century: Pope, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Johnson. Pope never missed an opportunity to emend a poem, however subtly, when the opportunity arose, and Maynard Mack's *The Last and Greatest Art*, a collection of Pope's manuscript revisions, is a remarkable testament to that. These authors were part and parcel of my metamorphosis into a writer and editor although all too often, in the morass of grading flawed student papers, my working life has stranded me on Grub Street, not the Ivory Tower, to struggle as a hack editor and critic. Into the graduate school mix of those writers came two brilliant scholars and teachers of the eighteenth century, J. Paul Hunter and Martine Watson Brownley, who shared their insights into writing—in particular the flaws in my writing—along with my experience of being thrown into the composition classroom as an instructor having to guide others.

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What emerged for me is a pedagogy that emphasizes and demands revisions from students in the context of peer editing and studying published works. For each of the composition papers students write for me in Honors English, I hope to see three, four, or even five formal drafts through the entirety of the semester although the number of students who take full advantage of the opportunity to benefit themselves and their grades seems to diminish each year. Joan notes that she employs strategies in her classroom to help students “become conscious of structure and vocabulary in their own work.” When exercised properly, revision does exactly that. Of course, my expectation is that students—by diligently searching for the best word, phrase, example, or quotation—will transcend craftsmanship, discover what they really think about a topic, and thus approach some originality of thought and insight. Too often, I have found that students in my honors writing courses emerged from high school without being pushed hard in the direction of originality or complexity of thought, relying instead on the formulaic three-point thesis, five-paragraph essay as if all the world could be segmented into three equal pieces. Unfortunately, high school teachers ply their trade in the trenches for their students, and indirectly for college professors, while beset by bureaucracy and burgeoning classrooms. To receive work from future honors students that has relatively clean prose, a modicum of structure, and some notions of an idea is a respite and not a stepping-stone for a work in process. Beleaguered high school teachers cannot devote the attention to the details of these competent essays that college instructors can. Thus college composition, particularly in an honors environment, can be disconcerting for students; essays once returned with gratitude and an A in high school are now deficient when it comes to offering a strong thesis statement, textured prose, and a convincing body of supporting evidence. Fortunately, most honors students respond to the demands with hard work rather than despair.

A secret to good writing, or at least one Zen adage applicable to good writing, comes down to three words: Attention. Attention. Attention. The problem with revision is that it demands that writers sustain their engagement with a topic through time and that kind of effort is foreign to many students in a culture where immediacy is the expected norm. Internet research too often is about the search and the speed of the search: the clicking from one location to another more than the substance of what is found, especially if what is offered is weighty and lengthy. And if Joan is correct in her assertion that “this audience wants exact duplication of the known—nothing new or different,” the comfort zone of such repetition seems to be away from books. In a far-from-scientific poll of my students this term, I asked them about the artistic and cultural works they found compelling and to which they returned time and again. Films, television, electronic games, and music were at the top. That many mentioned *When Harry Met Sally*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *The Princess Bride*, and the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* was somewhat comforting. (*Seinfeld*—good—and *Friends*—I’ve never seen it—were also frequently mentioned.) Rereading books was barely a tremor on the landscape of their choices.

The fascination with the familiar, the retelling of known stories, was a characteristic of oral cultures. Scholars like Walter J. Ong have often likened the modern age of instantaneous, immediate communication and response through computer

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technology to a secondary orality. Perhaps the onslaught of the new results in a necessary retreat into the familiar. Wisdom and knowledge in oral cultures are often aphoristic and poetic to promote remembering. Eighteenth-century couplets and Pope's valuation hearken back to these qualities: "True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest, / What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Exprest* . . ." (Essay 297-98). After Shakespeare, Pope is the most quoted English writer although many know not that they are quoting Pope. The difficulty comes for contemporary students, even if they are circulating in a New Age of Imitation, when they have to push beyond that which is quickly apprehended. Pope offers succinctness and true wit about learning. All of us know: "A little *Learning* is a dang'rous Thing. . . ." Many of us know the full couplet: "A little *Learning* is a dang'rous Thing; / Drink deep, or taste not the *Pierian* Spring. . . ." But the essence and the complexity of Pope's understanding emerge in the complete verse paragraph:

A little *Learning* is a dang'rous Thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the *Pierian* Spring;
There *shallow Draughts* intoxicate the Brain,
And drinking *largely* sobers us again.
Fir'd at first Sight with what the *Muse* imparts,
In *fearless Youth* we tempt the Heights of Arts,
While from the bounded *Level* of our Mind,
Short Views we take, nor see the *Lengths behind*,
But *more advanc'd*, behold with strange Surprise
New, distant Scenes of endless Science rise!
So pleas'd at first, the tousing *Alps* we try
Mount o'er the Vales, and seem to tread the Sky;
Th' Eternal Snows appear already past,
And the first *Clouds* and *Mountains* seem the last:
But *those attain'd*, we tremble to survey
The growing Labours of the lengthen'd Way,
Th' *increasing* Prospect *tires* our wandring Eyes,
Hills peep o'er Hills, and *Alps* on *Alps* arise!
—Essay 215-32

While Pope is always cognizant of the long journey and struggle in producing art, in *The Prelude* Wordsworth immediately turns to the imagination in response to his own crossing of the Alps:

Imagination—here the Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech,
That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps
At once, some lonely traveller. I was lost;
Halted without an effort to break through;
But to my conscious soul I now can say—
"I recognize thy glory:" in such strength

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Of usurpation, when the light of sense
Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
The invisible world, doth greatness make abode,
There harbours whether we be young or old.
Our destiny, our being's heart and home
Is with infinitude, and only there....

—6.592-605

Honor students are not inclined towards silent toil and meditation as they traverse the mountains of their own educational journey. If we do not feel their pain, we certainly hear about it. They are likely to remark upon their displeasures and their burdens. Education and its responsibilities, we must remind our students, are not loathsome obligations but treasures to celebrate and use. Albert Einstein said of education: "Teaching should be such that what is offered is perceived as a valuable gift and not a hard duty."¹ The task of judging their ascent, while less labor intensive, remains precarious. We must wonder whether our students are trudging a beaten path or discovering for themselves something new. Looking at the written text, Joan puzzled over the validity and quality of her Valedictorian's theme of theft "framed in a series of thank you notes to professors whose ideas he had stolen over the years." That tricky business of tone, which the Valedictorian successfully negotiated, captivated the audience, but the test over the long haul is whether such thievery resonates internally. In a Romantic Age, we might anticipate that the imagination is the synthesizing agent. In an Age of Imitation, perhaps repetition itself becomes the vehicle. Given the quality of political, religious, and cultural discourse these days, promoting an appreciation of eighteenth-century morality, wit, and satire, of Pope's "Prospect" view, might be of great service to our students and society.

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¹ Many thanks to Kate Bruce for this quotation from her Presidential Address at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the Southern Regional Honors Council.