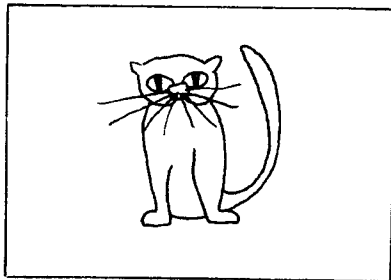


In the Library

Henry Baron

The madness of Ken Macrorie and Peter Elbow has been with us a while now. For surely there is madness in their methods, though not all in the profession agree that such madness is divinely rather than diabolically inspired.

The true-blue traditionalist teacher of composition is likely to suspect the latter, for it is his/her beliefs and

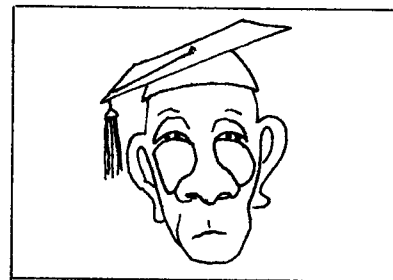


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practices that are especially challenged and upset. Neither Macrorie nor Elbow accepts the hallowed think-write tradition. Instead, carefully planned and executed writing must give way to "free writing," which is something like a verbal cloud burst, intense and concentrated, and, indeed, the necessary incipient force toward the shaping of more honest, and more powerful writing. Such an emphasis also rejects the more traditional materials and methods: a textbook full of prescriptions and proscriptions, explanations, definitions, and the inevitable exercises; assignments on impersonal subjects specified by the teacher, turned in on the due date by the students, eventually returned by the teacher who, if diligent, has contributed his/her emendations, injunctions, incriminations, or, if less than diligent, just a letter grade; after which, the next chapter of the textbook is studied, dealing perhaps with yet another method of paragraph development--and thus the cycle repeats itself all over again. Both Macrorie's Third Way and Elbow's teacherless class challenge and reject many of the underlying assumptions which govern this kind of composition teaching.

Macrorie, after years of blindness as he calls it, discovered the Third Way and gave it extensive promotion through the publication of his book Uptaught. What he discovered essentially was that students' writing tended to come alive when they wrote non-stop for short periods on personal subjects of their own choice. That turned his teaching around and led him to view education as neither a parroting process nor as limitless, unguided experimentation, but rather as requiring an environment in which students "are given real choices," in which they "operate with freedom and discipline," in which they are "encouraged to learn the way of experts."

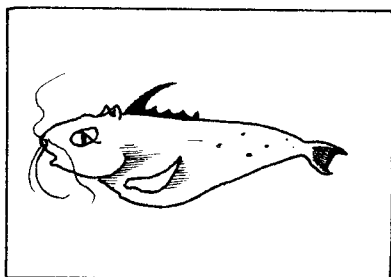
Uptaught is Macrorie's manifesto of that insight. It's a smorgasbord of fragments, like journal entries, that often sting with vitriol and ring with conviction. For in Uptaught Macrorie is an angry man, often with himself and his blind alliance for too long with an academic system that has, in his view, robbed students of their humanity. In many ways Uptaught is more an anti-Establishment tract than a book about writing, though Macrorie sees a direct connection between the academic institution that enslaves and writing that fails. A thoughtful reader will often be annoyed when Macrorie succumbs to hyperbole and occasionally even descends to disparaging



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other reputable, professional writers who have failed to see his light. But the many questionable assertions and some rather trite and trivial snippets sprinkled throughout Uptaught should not obscure the most important fact about this unconventional book: it raises some

fundamental questions about the teaching and the process of writing, and it has significantly altered the teaching of those who have taken Macrorie's Third Way seriously.



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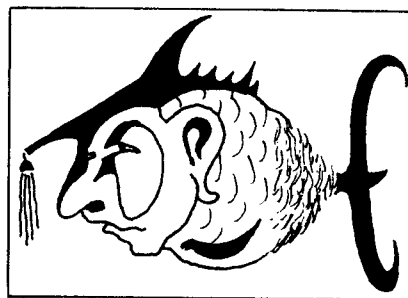
The Third Way

The Third Way means absolutely free writing at the beginning of a semester, later changing to assigned, planned, focused writing, "with freedom enough within each assignment to allow the student to find what counts for him. But discipline enough to insure that it usually also counts for the teacher" (p. 179). The Third Way also means exposing much writing to the whole class for response and critical analysis. For Macrorie, to teach the Third Way "is to set up an arrangement which allows the majority of students in a class to find their own powers and to increase them" (p. 88).

In Uptaught Macrorie boasts that students, following the new way, easily and naturally connect their class work to their outside experiences; A Vulnerable Teacher records that students often fail to make any connections at all. Hence Macrorie is still a somewhat disillusioned, if not an angry man; he believes that to be vulnerable means introducing one's real feelings and thoughts and experiences into the classroom; it means making personal connections. What others might denounce as subjective distractions or affective fallacies, Macrorie values as growth in truthfulness and depth of experience and insight. For students who resist or

reject personal vulnerability, the Third Way fails and fails badly.

A Vulnerable Teacher is not a satisfying book--not so much because more than half of it constitutes a loosely connected assortment of student writing, much of it less than powerful, but more because it lacks the verve and spirit of Uptaught. And ultimately it has little to teach us, for in the face of many a teaching disaster, Macrorie's usual stance is one of chagrined helplessness. Classes succeed or fail according to differences in student spirit. Still, it is true: Macrorie's faith, though tested and shaken, emerges intact by the end of the book. It remains, he says, the essential goal of his work "to open up and strengthen people who possess strengths. At the moment my challenge is to find ways of getting students to talk again. I will do that. They and I will find how to create new climates in which we will all grow" (p. 183).



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Macrorie's Approach to Teaching Writing

Macrorie's new approach to the teaching of writing is most concretely expressed in Writing To Be Read and Telling Writing. The first is intended as a high school text, the second for use in college; yet the two are virtually identical. These books feature extensive student and professional writing as models, both positive and negative. (In fact, less than half the books' prose is written by Macrorie himself.) The obvious point is that students learn not from rules but from observing the practice of others.

Though the chapters follow no apparent sequential design, any serious student using either text will learn much about writing and will do much writing, all the while enjoying both stimulation and challenge. Students will learn to eschew the dreadful disease of Engfish (a term Macrorie uses to designate the phony, pretentious, bloated, feel-nothing, say-nothing dead language of academia) and its derivatives like Whoery, Whichery, Thatery, Namery, Explainery, It-Ache and Is-ness. They will be challenged to write forcefully and truthfully in a variety of kinds, such as personal narratives, articles, reports, critiques, editorials, and dialogues; they will work on tightening and sharpening; they will practice the uses of irony, repetition, and parallel structure; and they will vary style, control sound, find angle, and maintain flow. To all of those activities will accrue all of the other skills that can make good writing better.

Much of this writing and rewriting will be exposed to the process of group discussion and response, which one chapter explains in very helpful detail. In the revised edition of Telling Writing, Macrorie has added an excellent section, titled "Suggestions for Teachers," which describes the thirteen points that make up the core of his writing program. More modest now than in Uptaught, Macrorie no longer proclaims the Third Way as the way to truth and life in writing, at the same time he more effectively persuades us that his way merits our thoughtful attention.

These texts are perhaps most useful for advanced students in high school and college, particularly those in creative writing. Macrorie emphasizes personal, informal, imaginative though disciplined writing--writing that is not merely clear, cogent, and coherent, but also full of feeling, likely to engage readers' interest. His books demonstrate that many Third Way students have obviously succeeded.

Peter Elbow Dismisses the Teacher

If Macrorie seems radical, Peter Elbow is more so. In his one book, Writing Without Teachers, Elbow advocates going further than eliminating conventional texts and methods: he would also dismiss the teacher. Instead he would have a group of seven to twelve people who commit themselves to meeting regularly for at least ten weeks, writing regularly, and submitting much of that writing to group members for their subjective reaction to its effect.

Elbow shares Macrorie's enthusiasm for free writing. But he pushes the concept much further, both in theory and application. A piece of writing is like an organism, going through several stages of development and growth, till it finally emerges with a clearly identifiable design, a "center of gravity," a life of its own, authentic and complete. If the writing is of a long text, the process would move through four one-hour stages: three 45-minute periods of rapid or "free" writing without editing interruptions; three 15-minute periods for reviewing the writing and uncovering a movement toward a main assertion; one last 45-minute period for more careful development of that main assertion; and a final 15-minute period for revising and editing. The text would then be exposed to group response, after which it would likely undergo more of what Elbow stresses as tough and ruthless editing.

Do Macrorie and Elbow make a difference? If my students are a valid sample, they do. Many for the first time begin to think about and practice writing as more than merely academic exercise. Many discover for the first time that they have memorable things to say and can learn to say them memorably. Many, indeed, experience a newly-found sense of freedom as writers.

If there is madness in the methods of Macrorie and Elbow, perhaps many of us as teachers and writers could profit from a little such madness, whatever the source of its inspiration.

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