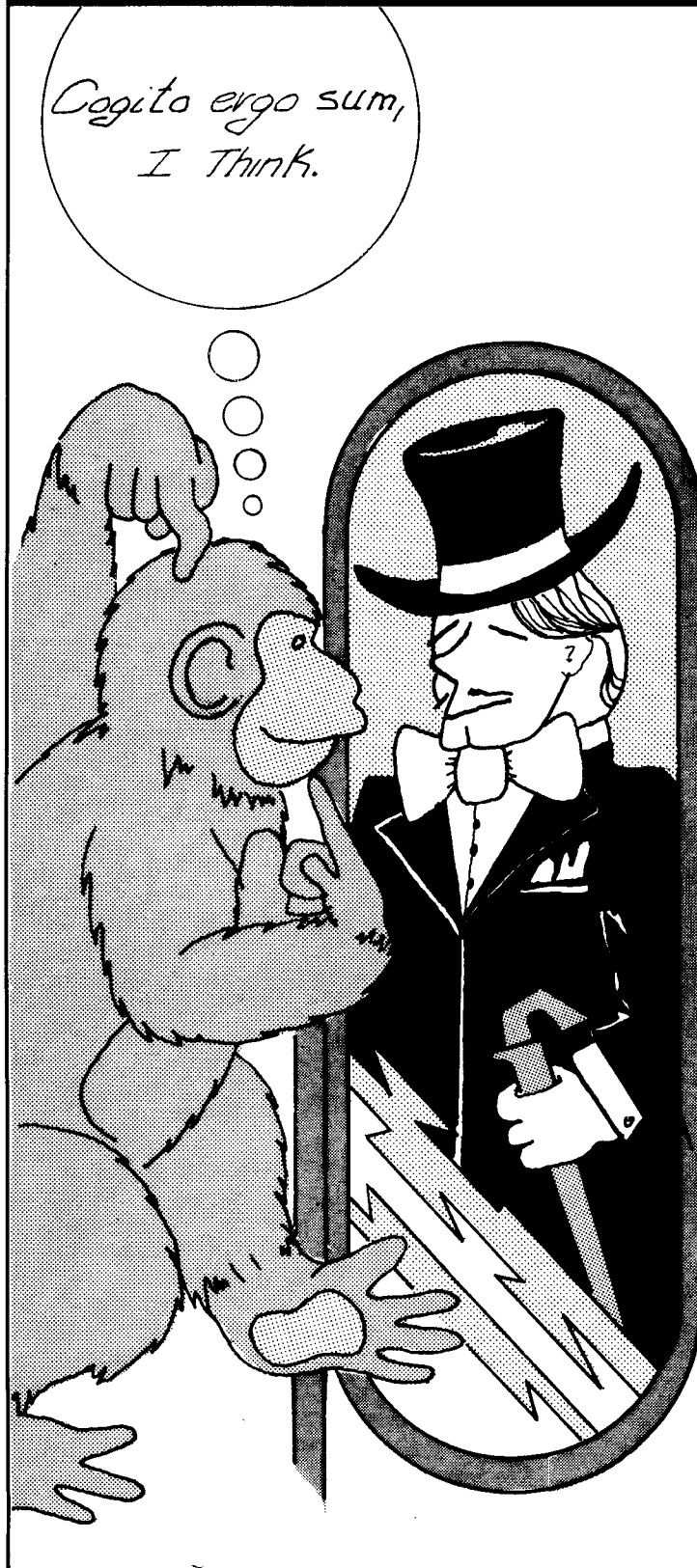


FFORUM

A Newsletter of the English Composition Board, University of Michigan



LANGUAGE-USING ANIMALS

Ken Macrorie

At lunch today Joyce, my wife, told me she had read in The New York Times that, unlike most animals, the young of higher apes are able to identify themselves in a mirror and react, some going so far as to preen themselves before the glass. This afternoon I picked up a copy of Undressed, a broadsheet of writing done by a student in a winter, 1978, class of mine. One story, by Lois, began this way:

When I was about two and a half, my parents, my brother, and I were watching TV. One of those terrible World War II movies came on where the Japanese pilots shoot at the Americans and scream jibberish to each other. I'm not sure whether it was just because the Japanese were so obviously the bad guys, but I suddenly realized that they looked weird.

Lois went on telling how she had called the Japanese "funnies," then looked over at her older brother and realized he resembled them. She began screaming in a sing-song voice, "Jimmy's a funny!" Eventually her father picked her up and placed her in front of a mirror which showed her she was a funny also. She became hysterical. The two Korean children had been adopted by an American family of German stock. "Since then,"

(continued on p. 3)

At the Lectern

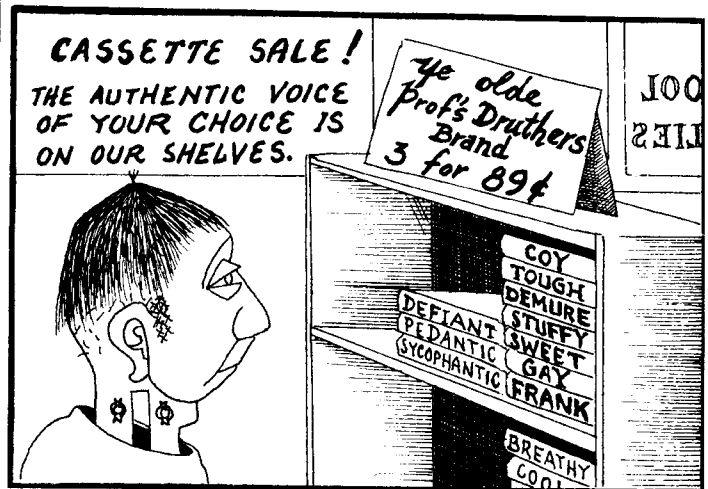
wrote Lois, "I've learned that people will accept me, Oriental or not, as long as I accept myself."

In the seminar where Lois's story was read aloud, the listener-readers were stunned. It was told simply and tersely with no embellishments, a Greek tragedy of recognition, touching fears of identity universal in all of us.

Six months later I was looking in a kind of mirror as I thought back over the experience of teaching 38 seminars in the last 14 years. The people ranged from 9- to 50-year-olds. As I stared at the glass of memory, I realized that I (and other teachers around the country who had directed similar seminars for a number of years) had before me a body of experience like that of an anthropologist who does field research. Week after week, month after month, year after year, we had observed groups of 10 to 30 people randomly chosen (within the selective processes of school enrollment) doing the same thing. They had attempted to tell of their experience truthfully, and were present to see the effect upon others who sat listening to the stories while holding a typed version of a narrative in hand.

At that moment I saw that some generalizing was justified. Writing is ordinarily read by an absent reader. That's its function--to provide communication between people who aren't in each other's presence. But in our seminars, the writers faced their readers, and perceived their body language, appreciative laughs, gasps of amazement at sensing common feelings, gulps, grunts, inarticulate "oh's," sharp intakes of breath, or glassy-eyed stares, all to be read as keenly as the listeners were reading the writing. I know about "creative writing" workshops, where for years writers have made up a critical audience for each other; but so often there they respond in what they consider "literary ways," careful to echo the teacher's pet critical attitudes or theories. Here, all responses were honored.

In the mirror I saw students who had begun the course writing freely, encouraged to concentrate on truth-telling and not worry about punctuation, spelling, or grammar, and then were further countenanced in the first three meetings by a prohibition set on responders against negative comments--"Positive remarks or nothing at all." Such a beginning encouraged that voice in their heads that speaks as most persons begin the strings of words that make up sentences and meaning on paper. Lois had written something shaking to us and to herself; the voice had supplied it in a flow.



Again and again in these seminars, writers use live metaphor, subtle alliteration, powerful parallel structure, significant rhythms, grabbing openings, and endings that let go. The situation frees them to be what they are--language-using animals. When the physical responses of the group are strongest, a paper that evokes them is often said by the writer to have "just written itself." Without realizing they are using a literary term, responders often say, "It all seemed to come from one voice."

But when these same writers think they are being asked to write a "critical paper," they usually lose the flow of words in their heads and write Engfish, the labored, word-wasting, empty dialect

of the schools. I'm beginning to understand why. Writing those papers, they revert to the common school experience--giving back the teacher's ideas--and the old feelings rise up in them, when they hadn't made themselves familiar with the actualities behind the ideas they were peddling. Unlike those few professional writers who write exposition powerfully, in most school writing students feel no ego satisfaction. Their work earns them no money. They won't lose their jobs if the writing is poor. If they're given a D or an F, they can always sign up for another section of the writing class. They know they're not writing for twenty other people, or hundreds or thousands, but for one--the teacher. It's wrong, this artificial, inhuman communication situation. It won't work. It never has worked. In the May, 1893, Atlantic Monthly, J. J. Greenough reflected upon "the great outcry. . . about the inability of the students admitted to Harvard College to write English clearly and correctly." He said the schools were requiring frequent written exercises that were corrected and commented on by the teacher, and asked, "With all this practice in writing, why do we not obtain better results?"

In the mirror I saw Lois's story about the "funnies" bringing about results in her peers. We have a way to go before the mirror shows powerful expository writing being read in writing classes. To bring that about we must put our students in situations where they feel a need to report, explain, or summarize.

Right now, I'm remembering Lois's paper. It made that room in Michigan shake like San Francisco.

Although retired from teaching, Ken Macrorie frequently conducts conferences and seminars for people interested in writing. His recently completed manuscript Searching Writing is to be published by Hayden Book Co. in the first half of 1980.

TEACHING WRITING WHILE TEACHING SOMETHING ELSE

Peter Elbow

We all teach writing, whether we are biology teachers or economics teachers or whatever. Or else we don't--in which case we make it harder for our students to write well. It turns out we can teach writing without taking any time away from biology or economics. I propose here thirteen ways of doing so. Most of them emphasize writing as process more than as product.

When the teacher insists on dealing with only the end product of writing, she is in effect teaching her students to focus their attention on the writing as if it were a pane of glass in the classroom window. Imagine the help, the relief, if she were to ask the students to focus through the glass to the scene beyond and simply forget about the writing. Those questions, which so often hamstring students who treat writing only as a product, will fade in importance: Did the writing communicate? What does the reader think of my writing? What does he think of me?

To accomplish this shift in focus, the teacher must structure writing activities which require (A) WRITING-AS-INPUT and (B) WRITING-AS-A-WAY-TO-GET-ANOTHER-JOB-DONE instead of and in addition to (C) WRITING-AS-COMMUNICATION.

(A) WRITING-AS-INPUT

WRITING-AS-INPUT isn't for others. It is only for the writer. It's not even for the writer as a product that she must evaluate; it is for her as a process. She can happily throw the writing away because the reason for doing it is to help her understand something she did not understand before. The four suggestions below are designed to give students experience in this process.

1) Whenever there is a bunch of input--a lecture or a lot of reading--have stu-