

# A CENTURIES-OLD DIALECTIC

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The scene, the English meeting room at State U. Four members of the freshman textbook committee are seated on the two sides of the oak library table. A fifth member rushes in late and sits at the end of the table.

In front of Mr. O'Faolain and Dr. Paley lie the blue-backed copies of Donald M. Murray's *A Writer Teaches Writing*, Second Edition. In front of Miss Chips and Dr. Brooks rest copies of Randall E. Decker's *Patterns of Exposition 9*. Dr. Arbitage, the latecomer, has no book. Before the vote, Dr. Paley reviews for Dr. Arbitage the discussion held previously.

"Mr. O'Faolain and I favor Murray's book. Notice the divisions listed in the table of contents. The familiar list of essays arranged by rhetorical patterns is missing. Instead, Murray teaches writing as though he expects the students to become writers—novelists, poets, journalists, diarists, makers of lists. When Murray develops his topic "A Model of the Writing Process" on page 10, he still does not give the students a preordained form. His process model advises Collect, Plan, Develop."

Miss Chips clears her throat and interjects. "The point I made, Dr. Arbitage, is that students cannot organize their thoughts, and we must give them patterns to memorize so that they have methods of organization. Notice the Decker table of contents: models for example, classification, comparison and contrast, analogy, process analysis, cause and effect, definition, description, narration, induction, deduction. Decker illustrates each pattern with excellent examples—Mark Twain, Tom Wolfe, Annie Dillard, even an example by Donald M. Murray. *I learned to write by following these expository patterns, and I have taught these models for years. I know exactly which forms are more troublesome. Analogy I leave out. It is too hard for our students.*"

Holding the Murray book open to page 4, Mr. O'Faolain counters by reading aloud, "We learn best—at least in the study

of composition—when we are *not* told in the abstract what to do and then commanded to do it, but are encouraged to write and then have the opportunity to examine what we have done with an experienced writer, who can help us discover what worked and what needs work” (4).

“Discover, discover! A buzzword. How can I grade a series of discoveries? When do I have time to grade two, even three drafts?” Miss Chips plops *Patterns of Exposition 9* against the table top.

Dr. Brooks nods, “I agree with Miss Chips. We teach freshmen to write according to these established arrangements so their term papers, reports, and examination answers are logical. We teachers of composition serve the other fields of academia.”

“There’s the point of disagreement, Dr. Brooks, Miss Chips.” Mr. O’Faolain faces one, then the other. “We are *not* a service course. The process of writing is not extraneous to the matter one knows. One knows because he discovers connections, relations that reveal insights and he makes these connections when he thinks and writes. A student may commit ideas from any subject to memory, *but* he does not know those ideas, I mean *know* those ideas, until he has seen the relation among the details that create the idea. Writing allows the student time to set forth the details, ascertain the relations, and discover the implication of the relation among details. Because writing is thinking, ideas cannot be pressed into a pre-ordained, extrinsic form. If you ask a student to do so, you ask a student to write writing, not to write thinking. Writing writing is an academic exercise and the purpose of education, as I see it, is not to train students in composition so that they can perform better on history exams. I believe writing helps students come to know their own thoughts. If it is a service course, it serves—not to help other teachers of the student—but to help the student, to liberate the student from the inanities of institutional education.”

Dr. Paley senses the heat. She turns to Dr. Arbitage. “Do you have any questions?” The negative reply frees Dr. Paley to ask the group to cast their ballots.

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Teachers of composition continue to hold at least two fundamental views on how writing should be taught. The mechanic view contends that a form must be imposed on the writing. The imposition of form enables the writer, in his search among the many

details, to locate those that pertain to his selected form. If a writer wants to contrast the transmission of a Lincoln with that of a Buick, he decides which transmission performs better, determines why it is better, and then discusses the transmissions by including in his writing only those details that illustrate the superiority of one and the inferiority of the other. The form enables him to separate, from the multitude of details, those that pertain only to the contrast.

The second view, the organic, argues that as one writes, what he thinks assumes a shape. This form is so integrally a part of the message that it is impossible to divide structure from content. The two come into being simultaneously, one creating the other during the writer's thinking and writing.

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The night after the vote, Dr. Arbitage dreams an imaginary scene, a small round wooden table in a little cafe near the campus of Princeton University. Two writes and Dr. Arbitage, when she was a nervous, thin graduate student, drink cappuccino and exchange thoughts. Their time together is brief because S.T. Coleridge has an appointment and J. McPhee feels the pressure of a deadline. Miss Arbitage's insistent tone urges Coleridge to reply to a question. "Just exactly what do poets mean when they equate the making of a poem, or the making of any piece of writing, with the molding of clay? I've heard professors here at Princeton tell freshmen that a writer chooses a pattern and shapes his thoughts to fit that mold: comparison, definition, classification. But you talk of the organic nature of writing. How do you reconcile the two views?"

Coleridge stares into his cup as his mind reaches back. "The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material—as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and fulness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form" (80).

The three fall silent, McPhee and Arbitage waiting for the old fellow to continue. After several swallows of espresso, Coleridge adds, "Could a rule be given from *without*, poetry would cease to be poetry and sink into a mechanical art. . . ." (79). Coleridge again clears his throat and signals the waiter to refill his cup with cappuc-

cino. Drinking the frothy liquid, he resumes: “. . . a living body is of necessity an organized one; and what is organization but the connexion of parts in and for a whole, so that each part is at once end and means” (79). Coleridge sets his mouth as though he has spoken his piece.

McPhee speaks. “I have experimented with both the organic and mechanic principles of structure. I believe I prefer the mechanic form because it arises from human logic” (55). McPhee looks at the old man for signs of disapproval, but Coleridge is noncommittal. McPhee continues, “*Oranges* follows the life cycle of a citrus fruit. . . .” Coleridge smiles. McPhee also smiles, “*Encounters with the Archdruid*, however, was planned *a priori* and I poured into the form the molten confrontations of Brower and company. So I’ve tried both—the organic and mechanic. I don’t advocate formal manipulation of content for the sake of formal manipulation, but for the sake of logic. Yet if the form gains ascendancy, the work becomes fussy, baroque. Then, too, organicism has limitations. The story of a horse race need not follow an oval pattern” (55). McPhee chuckles, for he thinks of the altar-shaped verse of George Herbert.

Placing a dollar bill on the table, McPhee rises; Arbitage rises, too, and they walk out the door. Coleridge dissolves. McPhee continues to frame his answer to the question: “I want a form that is logical but so unobtrusive that judgments of its content will seem to arise only in the reader’s mind” (55).

While McPhee and Arbitage walk across the campus, Coleridge has joined another who haunts composition departments. “My friend, Isocrates, shall we eavesdrop again today?”

“Ah, yes, let us listen to the young sophists at State U. Their talk reminds me of some of the foolishness I heard in Athens.”

The two oddities walk down the corridors and stop at the door of Miss Chips’ 101 class. Miss Chips has opened Decker’s *Patterns of Exposition 9* to page 109. She reads aloud the topics students may choose to develop in a comparison/contrast paper. She has drawn the pattern on the board and as she reads each topic she taps the pattern with her chalk. “Two kinds of home life.” Tap. “Two poets.” Tap. “Two moods of the same town at different times.” Tap. “The hazards of frontier life and those of today.” Tap.

Isocrates turns away. His raspy voice has a raucous edge. “. . . I marvel when I observe these men setting themselves up as instructors of youth who cannot see that they are applying the analogy

of an art with hard and fast rules to a creative process. For excepting these teachers, who does not know that the art of using letters remains fixed and unchanged, so that we continually and invariably use the same letters for the same purposes, while exactly the reverse is true of the art of discourse? For what has been said by one speaker is not equally useful for the speaker who comes after him; on the contrary, he is accounted most skilled in this art who speaks in a manner worthy of his subject and yet is able to discover in it topics which are nowise the same as those used by others. But the greatest proof of the difference between these two arts is that oratory is good only if it has the qualities of fitness for the occasion, propriety of style, and originality of treatment, while in the case of letters there is no such need whatsoever" (44).

Coleridge places his hand on his companion's shoulder. "Times have not changed, my friend."

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#### WORKS CITED

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