



The Plural Text/The Plural Self: Roland Barthes and William Coles

Joseph Harris

College English, Vol. 49, No. 2. (Feb., 1987), pp. 158-170.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0010-0994%28198702%2949%3A2%3C158%3ATPTPSR%3E2.0.CO%3B2-5>

College English is currently published by National Council of Teachers of English.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ncte.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Joseph Harris

The Plural Text/The Plural Self: Roland Barthes and William Coles

The role of the reader in how the meaning of a text is formed has been a nearly obsessive concern of recent critical thought. Books and articles abound taking one stand or the other on the question of where meaning lies: in the text, in the reader, in the intentions of the author, in the intertext, in the practices of interpretive communities, and so on. For the most part, such talk tends to be seen as a kind of elegant diversion—the stuff of graduate seminars and doctoral theses—somewhat removed from the more practical tasks of teaching our students to read intelligently and to write with conviction. And certainly things seem to go on pretty much as they always have in most classes on literature—that is, texts get assigned to be read and papers to be written, students plow more or less dutifully through both, some haggling over meanings and grades takes place, and students and teachers alike go home at the end of the term, having “done” Shakespeare, or the Seventeenth Century, or the Modern Novel, or even Literary Theory. The writings of Jacques Derrida and Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish haven’t changed *that*, and I doubt that any theory of reading ever will.

But while theories of reader-response or deconstruction may seem to have had little effect on the practice of teaching literature, they do hold much in common with how many of us try to teach writing. The reasons for this are fairly plain. The meanings of most texts read in literature classes really are pretty stable—not because they hold some sort of intrinsic fixed messages, but simply because they are familiar texts that we, as a community of readers at the university, have long agreed on how to go about interpreting. This isn’t the case, though, when we read student writing. Then we are faced with texts that are both new to us and whose meanings have often not yet been fixed even in the minds of their authors. In a freshman writing class the instability of meaning is a fact of life, not a point of critical debate. Nowhere else is the importance of a reader’s expectations, of interpretive codes, shown more clearly. Where we look for analysis, our students often appeal to emotion; where we expect example, they call on popular sentiment, what everybody knows. The problem is not that our students are dumb, but that they’re not yet members of the club—they don’t know the sorts of things we as academics look for when we read. And so one way of looking at our task as teachers of writing is to see it as helping our students to confront the kinds of talk that go on at the university, to think about the values and assumptions that underlie such discourse.

Joseph Harris teaches writing at Temple University.

College English, Volume 49, Number 2, February 1987

Jay Rosen has pointed to the ironic way in which recent theories of the indeterminacy of meaning have risen from the study of precisely those texts—literary works—whose meanings tend to be the most stable. Teachers of literature, concerned as they most often are with interpreting the texts of the established Canon, work in the mainstream of language, with those texts most familiar and central to our culture. As teachers of writing, though, we are concerned with the frames and margins of discourse—with what makes sense and what doesn't, with what is good writing and what isn't. Why does this argument fall apart while this one doesn't? Why is the meaning I construct from this text so unlike that intended by its author? Or why is it so difficult to make some texts mean much of anything at all? Such questions are the focus and bane of any good teacher of writing. They are also the same issues as those raised—in far more sweeping terms—by critical debates over the autonomy of the text and the locus of meaning.

The works of Roland Barthes and William Coles form a case in point. In temperament the two could not be less alike. Barthes was a literary epicure whose interests and prose style often seemed willfully obscure, high-flown, speculative. He was much taken by ideas and theories, but in a playful rather than methodical way, and his last and most provocative writings are purposely unsystematic, fragmented. More than anything, Barthes was the advocate of reading as a form of pleasure; his aim was not so much to interpret the text as a coherent whole but to seek out jolts of meaning—isolated moments of brilliance or intensity. The characteristic stance of Coles, on the other hand, is blunt, hard-nosed, straightforward. Where Barthes was flamboyant, arcane, Coles is direct. Far from appealing to an aesthetic of pleasure, his focus is ethical. While Barthes's interests and writings swung capriciously from the classics to fashion to mass culture to the *nouveau roman*, Coles has devoted his career to the teaching of writing. And even there he is reluctant to theorize—insisting instead that the teaching of writing, like writing itself, centers on forming a personal style which, if it could be described in general terms, would no longer be personal.

But I don't mean to make Coles into some sort of pedagogical hedgehog. When looked at closely, his prose is surprisingly quirky and complex, a plain style that proves not to be so plain after all. He has a particular liking for a seeming repetition—using the same words over and over, phrase after phrase, but in a way that shifts their meanings slightly with each use. Freighted with commas, qualifiers, rephrasings, his sentences advance, as Coles himself has put it, “somewhat crabbedly from one notion in them to the next” (“Counterstatement” 208), the idea being, it would seem, that to grasp the thought of such a sentence its reader must first become aware of, and grapple with, its shaping *as a sentence*. Such prose is the opposite of the linear ideal urged by E. D. Hirsch and others. In reading Coles, I find myself continually circling back in order to move forward, rethinking my place in the text, checking again to see how a certain word was used a line or sentence or paragraph before. His writing seems engineered to force a kind of rereading—or at least a very slow and close reading—from the start. His prose resists glossing; what it says seems peculiarly tied to

the precise form of its saying. To use one of his own most characteristic phrasings, I like how Coles makes me aware of his writing *as writing*—as the tracing of the particular choices of a particular writer.

The writings of Barthes and Coles are thus much unlike those of most academics. Neither works much for that tone of lucid restraint that is the supposed ideal of scholarly prose, and neither settles for the numb workaday voicelessness that is its actual norm. Indeed they are perhaps better thought of as writers than as academics. Both contest the distinctions made between so-called primary and secondary, creative and critical, forms of writing—and it is precisely this blurring of boundaries that makes their own writings so interesting and hard to place. Barthes rejects as an academic fiction the notion that criticism, that science, can be a kind of metalanguage—a language, that is, revealing and commenting on the structure and meanings of other texts, but whose own workings are neutral, transparent. Rather, he insists, “I cannot function *outside* of language, treating it as a target, and *within* language, treating it as a weapon” (“Lecture” 13). This leads him to suggest, in a lovely metaphor, that the critic must instead work like a Chinese shadow-caster who simultaneously shows his audience both the positioning of his hands and the silhouette of the duck or wolf or rabbit that they cast upon the wall (13).

Of course a divorce of form and content in writing is impossible; language never functions simply as a conduit of thought, and so even the most academic of writers can at best (at worst?) pretend to a full and colorless objectivity. The attempt of Barthes and Coles as writers is to create an answerable style—writing that must be dealt with on its own terms and not read merely as commentary on some other text. The value of such a style is not simply that it is more personal than most academic prose, but also that it shows a sensitivity to, and openness about, its own subjective grounding in language—to the ways in which what is said is shaped by the forms of its saying. To use another of Barthes’s metaphors:

The paradigm I am proposing here . . . is not aimed at putting scientists and researchers on one side, writers and essayists on the other. On the contrary, it suggests that writing is to be found wherever words have flavor (the French words for *flavor* and *knowledge* have the same Latin root). Curnonski used to say that in cooking “things should have the taste of what they are.” Where knowledge is concerned, things must, if they are to become what they are, what they have been, have that ingredient, the salt of words. It is this taste of words that makes knowledge profound, fecund. (“Lecture” 7)

Such an awareness of their own works as writings is essential, since both Barthes and Coles are preoccupied with the intertwining of language and the self, with the ways our sense of who we are is not only expressed by but composed in our languages. And both are much concerned with the problem of individuality, with what it means to have a style, a voice, with how a writer can use language in ways that set him apart from the pack, that are specific to him alone.

To show how these concerns distinguish them from many other thinkers on writing, I’ll have to backtrack briefly. Most books on writing make much of sincerity. Be yourself, they tell the writer. Write about what you really know, in a voice that is your own. Style is the man himself; it rests not on artifice but on

truth. So don't aim for a Style—or you'll risk never gaining one. Real eloquence is honesty; the best prose is the most natural.

The problem with such a view is that it reduces writing to a simple test of integrity: Either your guts are out there on the page or they're not. It's easy to see, then, why so many students are baffled or intimidated when we ask them to write about what they really know. For what do they really know? What do they do if their sense of the world and their place in it is yet—as it perhaps should be—uncertain, undefined? Seen this way, the advice to be yourself starts to seem dogmatic, bullying, for it assumes that writers already *have* a self somewhere, ready-made, that they merely need to make their prose reflect and express. Similarly, the advice to write in your own voice doesn't so much solve as restate the problem for most writers, which is: How do I form a voice to write in?

Both Barthes and Coles argue against a romantic view of the self as an essence—whole, unchanging, apart from the shifts of thought and language. Rather they suggest that it is only language that makes an awareness of self possible, that without language we could not have introspection. As Coles writes in *Teaching Composing*: “He with his languages is who he is; I with mine am I” (108). Writing is not simply a tool we use to express a self we already have; it is the means by which we form a self to express. For Barthes and Coles, then, the fullness of our sense of self hinges upon the density and richness of the languages that form and reveal it. What they thus value in any writing is complexity, indeterminacy, the opening up of as many kinds and levels of meaning as possible.

Barthes and Coles reject the idea of the self as a fixed wordless core in order to advance a view of it and the text as irreducibly *plural*. For Barthes, the goal of the reader becomes not the uncovering of some single correct interpretation of a work, but the freeing of as many varied and even conflicting meanings as the text might suggest. For Coles, the aim of the writer is no longer the Clarity and Simplicity of composition textbooks, but the creating of a text that suggests something of the complexity of its author.

For both, the voice of a writer is always a weaving of other voices; the self is seen not as an isolated whole but as an amalgam of other selves, voices, experiences. The image of the text Barthes continually returns to is that of a network, “woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages . . . which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony” (“From Work” 160). And what holds for the text holds for its reader (and writer) as well. As Barthes writes in *S/Z*: “This ‘I’ which approaches the text is itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost” (10). Later, he goes on to picture the self as a wake or wash of codes—a fluid melding of voices and languages. Such images recall Coles's insistence that the self of the writer is a *Plural I*, “an individual whose independence is conditioned by its new and free acknowledgement of its dependence—on both the self from which it came and on the rest of us as well” (270).

None of this denies the idea of individuality. Barthes, particularly, has been accused of a kind of anti-humanism, of, in the words of one critic, reducing the

self to “merely a collection or intersection of patterned forces” (Rosenblatt 172). But this sort of reading is reductive. What is really happening is that one idea of the self is being exchanged for another. Rather than viewing it as a kind of impenetrable core, Barthes sees the self as a network of relations so complex as to be irreducible. To turn the words of his critics around, the self is seen not *merely* as a single simple essence, but as an incredibly rich and layered tapestry of languages we constantly weave and reweave.

On the other hand, Coles is often misread as an advocate of some kind of Personal Writing—the term meant to suggest, I think, images of a quaint and naive humanism. James Berlin, for instance, in an often cited essay, places Coles in an Expressionist school of composing that views the discovery of truth as a purely personal matter, as something that can be learned but not communicated. The goal of writers is to form Authentic Voices of their own, to come to their own individual visions of the real, and the only role of readers in all this is to act as a check against lapses into insincerity. Coles comes off as a kind of ornery Peter Elbow or Ken Macrorie, briskly exhorting his students to be true to themselves alone.

Such a view wholly manages to miss the central tension in Coles’s work. Coles *is* concerned with the problem of voice, of individuality, in writing. But this concern is predicated on the belief that our language is never fully our own, that a writer’s text is always a patchwork of other texts. Writers define their own voices not so much against those of others as *through* them. The real issue is not so much one of authenticity as difference. The task of writers is not to make language adhere to some mystic and wordless vision of their selves, but to use language in a way that begins to *constitute* a self. Berlin’s problem in reading Coles is, I think, that he sees him as starting with the self of the writer and then moving to the question of what language best expresses that self. The movement is actually the opposite. Writers start with a language common to us all and try to claim some part of it as their own. To develop a style is to appropriate a way of using language. As Mikhail Bakhtin writes in *The Dialogic Imagination*:

The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that a speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. (293-94)

For Coles, finding one’s own voice as a writer can only occur through placing oneself within the discourse, or more precisely, the discourses of others. Always the need is for writers to define themselves *as* someone or something, to locate a sense of self in relation to some ongoing discourse. And so, for instance, Coles argues in an essay on training teachers of writing:

Each teacher, in order to find a way with our materials and our procedures, has to combine the several structures of the course for himself, has to find his own way of amalgamating his own experience as a student *and* a teacher, a reader *and* a writer,

a talker *and* a listener, not so much, in the terms of that term, in order to define “literacy crisis,” but to define himself as someone who on the basis of what he chooses to call the literacy crisis has developed a style with which to meet it. (“Teaching the Teaching” 270)

Similarly, in *The Plural I*, Coles talks of his students’ need to recognize that they are part of a certain kind of discourse before they can begin to define themselves as writers, as individuals, within it. In discussing an assignment in which he asked the members of his class, all students of technology, to describe a scientific law to a non-scientist, Coles writes of his hope that they would also confront the need to

make what they can of the implications of seeing different disciplines as different language systems and of the implications of seeing a professional as someone able to use the language of his system to grow as a person. . . . In confronting the paradox of the importance of some scientific law or principle *because* of its meaninglessness outside the system to which it has relevance, there is the opportunity for the scientist to come to terms with himself as a scientist, to discover through his description of the incommunicable nature of something scientific to the non-scientist, the indispensable significance of it to himself. (213)

For Coles, the question of style is one of individuality. But he sees individuality not as something each of us simply has, but as something each of us must make. The self is viewed as a problem, not as a given. But to look at it this way—as not some wordless essence but as a creation of language—is also to confront the possibility of a self filled with nothing but commonplaces, clichés, emptiness—of a self that, as Barthes would put it, is wholly “written” by the discourses of others. And so a tension between style and dogma—between those uses of language that somehow form and express a self and those that are no more than, well, language—runs throughout Coles’s thought.

Lewis Gilbert’s *Educating Rita* offers a nice example of this tension. The plot of the movie is *Pygmalion* in reverse. A young working-class woman, Rita, just enrolled as an Open University student, comes to a drunken and bored professor of English Literature for tutoring. The professor is startled and enchanted by Rita’s wit, passion, and lack of cant. For one of her first essays, in response to a question of how to deal with the logistical problems of staging *Peer Gynt*, she simply writes: “Do it on the radio.” When informed by her tutor that, while it does offer a workable solution to the problem, her brief response could hardly count as an *academic* essay, Rita, in a burst of anger, hurriedly writes out the same answer in a lengthier, more polished form fit to satisfy any examiner. The gesture amounts to saying: “I can do this, you know, if I want to. I can speak your language as well as mine.”

Her tutor tells Rita that she has nothing to learn from him. But Rita wants to be Educated and demands further instruction. What she learns, of course, is how to look and speak less like herself and more like a Student of Literature. In a lovely and sad scene near the end of the film, Rita returns to her tutor to ask about a practice exam she has written on Blake. He has read it, without enthusiasm, though we have the impression it was a good (successful) paper. Preferring not to talk of it, the tutor simply points to a pile of blue books filled in by other

university students, saying: "It wouldn't look out of place with these." Missing his irony, Rita hears the comment only as a confirmation of her new educated status. She has been appropriated by the university.

I don't mean to suggest that such appropriation is somehow necessarily evil. Let me instead invert what Jonathan Culler has said about reading: One always writes as a writer. To write a text is to be caught up in a social activity one does not wholly control (see Culler 56). But, then, neither does one wish to be wholly controlled by it. The question is not how to stand outside a discourse but how to function within it. Style is not simply an effusion of self, nor is it mere adherence to prevailing norms of usage and decorum. Rather it is to be found in the tension between the two, between the writer and his community of discourse, idiolect and dialect.

For Barthes, the worst sort of writing was the closed work, the well-made text of a Balzac or Racine, whose meanings have become so plain and accepted that there is little left for its reader to do—no ambiguities for him to guess at, no tension, no insights to tease out of hiding. The thrust of his *S/Z* was to show that the genius of Balzac lay not so much in describing what was *real* as in stringing together the clichés and maxims of his day into an apparently seamless text. As Barthes notes, Balzac often seems to be writing as if on his desk were

a History of Literature (Byron, *The Thousand and One Nights*, Ann Radcliffe, Homer), a History of Art (Michelangelo, Raphael, and Greek Miracle), a History of Europe (the age of Louis XV), an Outline of Practical Medicine (diseases, convalescence, old age, etc.), an Ethics (Christian or Stoic: themes from Latin translations), a Logic (for syllogisms), a Rhetoric, and an anthology of maxims and proverbs about life, death, suffering, love, women, ages of man, etc. Although entirely derived from books, these codes, by a swivel characteristic of bourgeois ideology, which turns culture into nature, appear to establish reality, "Life." "Life," then, in the classic text, becomes a nauseating mixture of common opinions, a smothering layer of received ideas. (205-06)

Such writing—which recycles ideas and phrases without ever questioning their validity or aptness—is only too familiar to most of us, since it is the essence of the English theme, that peculiar brand of schoolwriting in which the sole object of the writer is to cast the most innocuous thoughts into the most bland and acceptable formats.

For Barthes, the question of style was how to do something besides such a recycling of truisms and clichés, how to forge something new out of a language never wholly our own, that always comes to us secondhand, its forms and meanings set and used by countless others before us. What he came to value, then, was unorthodoxy: writing that resisted being read too easily, whose meanings and voices were too many and complex to be reduced to a single point or moral or explanation. What is individual is that which resists being wholly understood, obvious, docile. The best writing then would be

a *composite* art, looping together several tastes, several languages. Such artists provoke a complete kind of joy, for they afford the image of a culture that is at once differential and collective: plural. (*Roland Barthes* 54)

Similarly, the whole force of Coles's thought is against what he names Themewriting—that impersonal and often grandiosely vague prose written “inside a vacuum from which all living concerns are carefully excluded” (*Plural I* 18). The problem with such writing, for the writer, is that it threatens to obliterate experience, much as Barthes accuses Balzac's writing of doing, by wrapping it in clichés. As Coles argues in *Teaching Composing*:

Where for me now are all those rich experiences I must have had in the fourth or fifth grade? Where are all those lesser known Shakespeare plays that I've read but was never “made” to write papers on and never talked over with anyone? Why is it that when I go tiptoeing back through a diary I kept in high school and come upon the entry: “With Marilyn tonight: the greatest yet”—I can no more remember that night than I can what was great about it? . . . To go through life Themewriting my experience into bloodless abstractions—we had a swell time; she was really cool; it was a great trip—is to end up finally with a great deal of that life having trickled through my fingers. (36)

The sort of pedagogy suggested by Barthes's writings is one in which we continually ask our students to look at the codes—that is, beliefs, values, assumptions—that they bring to the forming of their texts, as well as to look for those points in their writings which actually do seem singular, unexpected, more than shufflings of received ideas. One way of going about this is Coles's practice of having his students write numerous short papers in which they're asked not only to consider various ways of seeing an issue, but to reflect upon their own previous writings as well, to rethink stances they've taken, to modify voices they've assumed. And so in his composition texts for students, Coles begins with a set of writing tasks that appear deceptively simple (“Define *professional*”; “Tell what you think makes writing good”), but that are soon shown, through a progressive layering of questions and ideas, to be merely points of entry into an ongoing conversation in which the stance taken by any one writer on any one issue both depends upon and adds to what others have had to say on the same subject (see *Composing*, *Composing II*, and Coles and Vopat). By thus raising and intertwining the questions of voice, definition, and perspective in writing, Coles invites his students to look on the self as plastic, open to change, as something writers mold as they play with and test the limits of their languages.

In *What Makes Writing Good?*, a text he recently put together with James Vopat, Coles describes his assignments as based on a three-part structure. First students are asked to *do* something: to write a definition, to speculate on the meaning of an event or activity, and so forth. Then they're asked to *reflect* on what they've just done, to think on the choices they faced as writers and on how the ways each of them handled those choices began to contribute to the forming of his own particular stance as a writer, to the developing of his own particular style. Finally the students are asked to think on what all this is *for*. Why write a definition? What's in it for you—as a student, as a writer, as a person? The point of such assignments, and of the sort of writing class they are meant to be used in, is, Coles and Vopat argue, “to dramatize what it means to conduct an intelligent conversation” about writing, to create a community in which students

begin to look at themselves as writers and at their own writings as possible sources of learning (xi-xii).

In *The Plural I*, Coles's novelistic account of a course he taught at the Case Institute of Technology, we see the members of the class slowly coming together to form a shared vocabulary for talking about writing, a shared sense of what works and what doesn't. This doesn't happen easily. The classes at the beginning of the term, as described by Coles, often seem tense and sometimes bordering on open conflict. Repeatedly, the students seem to be trying to figure out what sort of game Coles is playing with them, but without admitting that they too are playing games of their own. There's no single breakthrough point, no epiphany (when in teaching is there?), but by the middle of the term the tone of the questions and replies has shifted. By then many in the class seem to realize that, if they are ever going to get at what Coles "really wants" from them, they're going to have to own up to what *they* really want as well. And that means looking seriously at their own writing, their own talk.

So the class becomes, at its best moments, an inquiry into the writings of the people who compose it. The students write for each meeting of the term, and they and Coles talk about what they've come up with. So the reader, the teacher, is no longer simply the spectator (and judge) of the writer's work. Rather reader and writer are joined in a dialogue that both centers on and gives rise to the writings of the class. The text in such a class is seen as the intersection of the languages of the writer, the reader, and the school. It is thus the site of a kind of drama, a struggle between competing voices. What is at issue is not simply how clear or correct its phrasings are, but who is speaking in it—how much we hear in it of its author and how much of the more familiar languages of school or authority.

Barthes dedicates *S/Z* to the friends and students he worked with while writing it, saying that the text was "written according to their attention to it." The phrase well describes the interaction of writers and readers shown in *The Plural I*. The class becomes a small community of discourse, a group whose habits of reading in part shape the writings of its members. The question such a class raises are ones of definition: Who is speaking in this text? What is his relation to his subject? to his reader? to himself? To what degree is the text interwoven with the languages of the class, school, culture? To what degree ought it to be?

In *The Grain of the Voice*, Barthes speaks of the need for the teacher to resist assuming the voice of power, to avoid closing off the talk of his students by assigning his own fixed and authoritative meanings to the texts they have read. The strategy of the teacher, Barthes suggests, should be one of *disappropriation*, a deliberate casting off of authority as speaker so students can claim some of it for their own (149). In such a classroom the teacher is no longer simply the representative of the university, whose role is to tell students when their interpretations of texts are correct (accepted) or not, but is instead a figure who simultaneously reveals and contests the languages of power, presenting the discourse of school without imposing it as natural or obvious. The goal of Barthes as a teacher was not to lead students to accepted readings of various texts, but to show them the forces behind such readings, to demonstrate why such texts get

read as they do—and thus to call into question the established practices of reading. The choice of whether to take on the languages of power, of the university, or to dissent from them, he left to his students (“Lecture” 14-15).

Similarly, the class in writing taught by Coles is not a service course. His goal is not to teach students what will be expected of them in their other courses or in the Real World, but to suggest that any writing is the result of many conflicting intents and demands—of the writer for self-definition, of the reader for difference and originality, of the institution for correctness and decorum. Coles’s aim is not to offer a formula for juggling such issues, but to give students a sense of what is at stake when they write, of the choices they face as writers. Coles bluntly refuses to accept the authority of any one way of talking about writing; instead he claims that all any teacher really has to offer students is the example of his own style, his own particular ways of working through the questions and issues of his discipline. To come to grips with a subject like writing, Coles argues, what one needs are not pronouncements on it, but the chance to watch the mind of a serious writer and reader at work—not in order to imitate those workings, or to abstract them into some method, but to force, in response, a new awareness of the workings of one’s own mind, one’s own style (*Plural I* 1-3).

The worry of most writing teachers traditionally has been to get students to turn out acceptable prose, to imitate the forms of standard written English. What Coles would have students do is more complex: to master, in order to push beyond, such formulas and conventions, to learn that to know the rules fully is really to know when and how to break them. That is what developing a style of your own (and for your own uses) is all about.

Barthes talks in *The Pleasure of the Text* of how it was always the gaps left in writing—those points where the writer’s meaning was uncertain, ambiguous—that most interested him. And the sort of writing Coles most often praises is that which forces its reader to go back, to reread, to rethink what it might or might not imply—the sort of writing in which “someone’s trying . . . to put and hold together not just too much with too little, but all he knows with all he has” (Coles and Vopat 327). And so Coles also points to a dense and elusive musing on the university and one young man’s place (or non-place) in it as perhaps the best writing he’s ever gotten from a student. The piece resists naming—it seems at once lyric, memoir, narrative, polemic—and it’s clear that this is why Coles likes it so—for its reluctance to be pinned down, laid out before the careful categorizing eye of the examiner. As Coles writes of it:

That I am pushed by this paper, have been for years, to the edge of irresponsibility, to becoming as a reader what I’d never figured I’d have to become as a reader of student writing—not better but more alive—is precisely why I call it excellent. (Coles and Vopat 328)

And he finishes his reading of the piece as follows:

“Give me a sentence,” says Thoreau, “that no intelligence can understand. There must be a kind of life and palpitation to it, and under its words a kind of blood must circulate forever.” Dangerous and dreadful this would be to teach as a doctrine

surely, in any writing classroom, but without being informed by an awareness of what the sentences point to, no writing classroom can be. (328)

None of this is talk that fits in well with the familiar and countless textbook demands for Clarity and Coherence, Readability and Structure, or with the more recent rephrasing of those demands as a call for reader-based prose. What Barthes and Coles argue against, in the end, is a functionalist view of writing—a view of writing as merely communication, merely a vehicle for sending out ideas and feelings, merely a tool.

Coles's insistence that there needs to be something in the act of writing for the writer—something, that is, more than the vague promise of good grades and good jobs—echoes Harry Braverman's warnings in *Labor and Monopoly Capital* about what happens when, in the name of progress and efficiency, the worker is separated from his craft. Braverman notes that the more mindless or routine a job is made, the harder it becomes to get people to do it—much less do it well. In a society like our own, he argues, the intrinsic rewards of most kinds of work are almost nil. The only way to get people to do their jobs, then, is to offer them more and more extrinsic pay-offs: more money, more things to buy, more vacations. Work becomes an expedient, a technique, a way of getting money for one's real life (as a consumer) and little else. The problem is, as has often been noted, that it is hard to fuel work through extrinsic rewards alone. The best year of owning a VCR is the first. The cycle of getting and spending begins to feel increasingly empty—not because the world is too much with us but, as Denise Levertov has put it, because it is not with us enough. Without the immediate and sustaining influence of craft, of purpose, in one's work, the feeling grows that too much is being given away for too little.

The thrust of Braverman's thought is that work is never neutral: If modern labor no longer helps to form character, as the crafts once did, then it now deforms it with its vacant and alienating routine. Similarly, for Coles writing can never be merely a tool. One can choose to look at it this way, but that is still a choice with consequences. Some of the writing always sticks to the writer—no matter how anonymous the prose, how non-committed the stance—and sooner or later all those neutral and carefully chosen words begin, not to hide their author, but to define him. One can't churn out prefabbed phrases and ideas without also turning oneself in some way into a machine. The effect of such an attempt is, as Coles writes, "of turning the activity of writing and everything associated with it into a kind of computerized skill" ("Freshman" 136).

The task of the teacher of writing is thus not to train students to make their prose ever more Clear and Efficient. Neither is it to simply encourage them to be Expressive and Sincere. Rather it is to set up a situation that dramatizes the forces at work in writing, that begins to show the interplay of writer and text and reader, of student and teacher and university. It is to suggest that to reduce the complexities of writing to a single demand to be personal or to be clear is to trivialize it, that good writing is not simply writer-based or reader-based, but something of both.

There are in the teaching of writing two common approaches to the question of style. One—which associates style with proper usage—turns it into a trifle;

the other—which equates style with integrity—gives it an undue air of sanctimony. Barthes and Coles offer us a view of style based on neither correctness nor sincerity but on complexity. In viewing the self as a kind of incredibly complex text, as a creation of language whose meanings are constantly shifting and evolving, they help us lend substance to the cliché that style is the man. For by insisting that the ‘I’ of the writer is not something he brings to his text, but is rather something composed within its phrasings, they show us the dialectic of writing and the self: We are what our languages make of us and what we can make of our languages.

Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.
- Barthes, Roland. “From Work to Text.” Trans. Stephen Heath. *Image/Music/Text*. New York: Hill, 1977. 155-64.
- . *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews*. Trans. Linda Coverdale. New York: Hill, 1985.
- . “Lecture.” Trans. Richard Howard. *October* 8 (1979): 3-16.
- . *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill, 1975.
- . *Roland Barthes*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill, 1977.
- . *S/Z*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill, 1975.
- Berlin, James. “Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories.” *College English* 44 (1982): 765-77.
- Braverman, Harry. *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. New York: Monthly Review, 1974.
- Coles, William E., Jr. *Composing II*. Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden, 1981.
- . *Composing: Writing as a Self-Creating Process*. Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden, 1974.
- . “Counterstatement.” *College Composition and Communication* 29 (1978): 206-09.
- . “Freshman Composition: The Circle of Unbelief.” *College English* 31 (1969): 134-42.
- . *The Plural I*. New York: Holt, 1978.
- . *Teaching Composing*. Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden, 1974.
- . “The Teaching of Writing as Writing.” *College English* 29 (1967): 111-16.
- . “Teaching the Teaching of Composition: Evolving a Style.” *College Composition and Communication* 28 (1977): 268-70.
- Coles, William E., Jr., and James Vopat. *What Makes Writing Good?* Lexington, MA: Heath, 1985.

Culler, Jonathan. "Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading." *The Reader in the Text*. Ed. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980. 46-66.

Educating Rita. Dir. Lewis Gilbert. Columbia, 1983.

Hirsch, E. D., Jr. *The Philosophy of Composition*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979.

Rosen, Jay. "Structuralism in Reverse." *Et Cetera* 41 (1984): 38-45.

Rosenblatt, Louise. *The Reader/The Text/The Poem*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1978.

This essay began as part of a dissertation in English Education at New York University, where I had the good fortune to have as teachers and readers Gordon Pradl, John Mayher, Lil Brannon, Trika Smith-Burke and Jay Rosen. My thanks go to them all.