Mid-19th Century Writing Texts: What Did They Look Like? or, Looking at Some Feathers of a Lost Bird

I want to begin with a word of background on this work. Last winter and spring, I had the unusual opportunity to work at the Library of Congress during a sabbatical leave. There I was able to rummage through the cavernous and labyrinthine stacks and to take a first hand look at the Library's collection of early textbooks. I started the project thinking I would do one piece of work, but in fact, as it so often happens, I ended up doing another. And it's part of what I found that I want to share with you today; it's early work, work-in-progress as it were, and I welcome your thoughts about it as this is the first time I have tried these ideas out on an audience larger than a writing group I belong to.

I ended up focusing on two ideas: how we do history, and what can happen when you take an up close look at any given piece of historical terrain.

Some Thoughts About Doing History

Contemporary historians and historiographers explain that history is not the objective or positivistic record of events that it once seemed: "a record of truth for the instruction of mankind: (Blair, p. 398b). Repeatedly, they draw the distinction between history as event (*res gestae*) and history as account (*historia rerum gestarum*) (Stanford, p. 1), between history as documentary and history as rhetoric (LaCapra, pp. 15-44). Hayden White goes so far as to say that "history is an intellectual enterprise akin to rhetoric or poetic (LaCapra, p. 33)" and the French historian Paul Veyne suggests that history is a "true novel." In another place, Veyne suggests that history is a city, and that when we do history, "we visit what is still visible of that city, the traces of it that remain." While these students of history use different tropes to make their point, they would seem to agree with Michael Stanford that "a historian and a recording angel are two very different things" (*The Nature of Historical Knowledge*, p. 127): the historian simply can't get it all.

In composition studies today, scholars such as Berlin, Connors, Crowley, Halloran, Horner, Johnson, Murphy, Stewart, and Vitanza have traced for us some insights into the history of teaching writing and rhetoric in American schools and colleges. As they do their work, they repeatedly and generously say that their findings are tentative, that there is much more investigation to be done, that future study will turn up new ways of understanding what has gone before. The call is to search for materials

that have not yet surfaced: student writing, other unpublished materials, little known texts, little known writers A likely temptation--certainly it was mine when I began to look at little known 19th century texts--is to think that with the recovery of new materials, those of us interested in historical work can piece together the patches or fill in the spaces, and that, working together, we can write a single, unified history of writing instruction in this country. In fact, I would like to suggest that all we can find are traces and fragments, or, if you will, the feathers of a lost bird, and that we miss the point of contemporary historians if we think that from the feathers we can reconstruct the bird, or even worse, that there is only one bird.

The advantage of seeing incompletely, of seeing in parts, is that we make space for conversation, space for difference, space for perspective, space for multidimensionality--and that in making this space, we are more likely to take an honest stab at representing what was real. Henry Giroux makes the point that "traditions should be valued for their attempts to name the partial, the particular, and the specific"; he goes on to say that "postmodernism argues for a view of history that is decentered, discontinuous, fragmented, and plural" (*Border Crossings*, p. 122).

Early and Mid 19th Century "First Books"

So to turn to the particular subject of this paper: early 19th century writing texts. In Robert Connors' essay "The Rhetoric of Explanation," he documents that the text that had the most influence on other composition books in the early 19th century was John Walker's *The Teacher's Assistant*. Originally published in London in 1801, the book's 1810 American edition made Walker, according to Connors, "the exemplar for a whole school of composition pedagogy," a pedagogy that Connors claims most secondary texts used between 1815-1840 (p. 205). What I am interested in here is a sampling of books that interrupt or complicate the patterns of Walker's pedagogy and in some ways anticipate contemporary pedagogy. It's worthwhile noting that while any generalization is fraught with peril, it seems as if the books that most often veered away from Walker were what I call First Books, books for beginners or young composers, books intended to introduce students to composition. In "The Reform Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Composition Teaching," William Woods argues that it is with books for young students that education made its first move from discipline centered to student centered teaching and learning (p. 387).

The complete title of Walker's book is *The Teacher's Assistant in English Composition; or Easy Rules for Writing*

Themes and Composing Exercises on Subjects Proper for the Improvement of Youth of Both Sexes at School. Like the titles of many early 19th century texts, Walker's title elaborates on (rather than simply names) what he is about in his book: giving rules, or what came to be thought of as principles of composition. For each of the book's four main sections--Themes, Regular Subjects, Easy Essays, and Narrative--Walker offers a page or two of explanation. In the section on Themes, for example, he defines a theme as "the proving of some truth" and then lists the six-part proof: the proposition, the reason, the confirmation, the simile, the example, the testimony, and the conclusion. The major part of the chapter then consists of 21 sample themes, with each of the six-proofs labelled for each theme. Each of the 21 themes is based on an aphorism ("Well-begun is half done," "Nip sin in the bud," "No art can be acquired without rules," etc.) and relies on abstract ideas, assumes a shared world view and moral code, and cites authorities such as the "moralists of all ages," "wise philosophers," and "ancient moralists."

Walker's Principles--and the Ways They Are Challenged

As in many early books, the central directives to teachers about teaching the composing process are articulated in the "Preface," and elaborated in the "Introduction." Different readers, I'm sure, might name or see these points differently, but the points from Walker that for me are central and that I am choosing to represent are ~~four~~ Three. The italics are mine.

1. The place from which the student begins writing is listening to the teacher read and explain the rules (in prose and in verse) for a particular kind of discourse. The student copies the rules as she hears them and then commits them to memory.

As anyone who has looked even briefly at early composition textbooks, the rule was to start with the rules, not with practice. In 1935, Emily Besig wrote a dissertation at Cornell entitled "The History of Composition Teaching in the Secondary Schools before 1900." Two points she makes in that work are these: (1) that composition and grammar were both introduced into the American school about 1750 and that Franklin's Academy in Philadelphia was the first school to recognize composition as an important part of the curriculum, and (2) that the study and teaching of composition lagged behind the study and teaching of grammar for three reasons.

Besig argues that most textbook writers, following Lindley Murray, believed that the study of grammar was the necessary beginning place for literacy practices, Murray writing in the Preface to his 1795 grammar "English Grammar

is the art of speaking and writing the English language with propriety" (quoted in Besig, p. 23). Thus there was no place for composition until the child, having begun her literacy study with the "word," was ready to move to more complex forms, a process that invariably took years. I find this same sentiment in Rippingham's 1816 *Rules for English Composition*, Rippingham writing, "The commencement in the art of literary composition, requires nothing more than a gentle exercise of reason. . . . The theory and idiom of the language must first be attained; for who can express his ideas by words the relative dependency of which he has not ascertained." (Rippingham, p. B2). Besig suggests that a second reason that the study of composition lagged behind the study of grammar is that the primary teaching method, following the study of Latin, was to memorize and recite rules. A new method would be required for the teaching of composition. Finally, Besig argues that because school masters had so many subjects to teach (she cites one teacher in East New Jersey who was assigned to teach English, Latin, Greek, arithmetick, algebra, trigonometry and sailing), they of course preferred "hearing rules of grammar to correcting themes" (Besig, p. 24). Following this emphasis on memorizing and rules, it is not surprising that when composition began to make its way into the curriculum, it was after the student had spent considerable time on grammar. Eventually students generated their own sentences to practice the use of a grammatical principle (Parker insists on this), eventually they wrote from teacher-given outlines, eventually they wrote original essays, but initially, learning the composing process began with memorizing rules and Walker's text is a principal demonstration of that belief.

Two writers who interrupt these patterns are Charles Morely in his *A Practical Guide to Composition* (1839) and John Frost in his *Easy Exercises for Composition* (1839); Morely taught at the Green-Street Seminary in Albany and Frost taught at Central High School in Philadelphia. Both of them argue for a more natural way of learning to write than was common in other books. In his Preface, Morely writes, "Children and youth are taught to spell and read what they do not understand, to define without understanding the definitions, and to commit to memory the words of grammar, rhetoric, . . . while scarcely a sentence is understood. . . . The pupil should first gain thoughts, clear conceptions of things, and then proceed to learn their names--this is nature's process with the infant . . . " (p. iv). In a similar vein, Frost argues for a more natural way of learning to write:

> In teaching a child to express himself freely and naturally in conversation, we do not begin by systematically inculcating the rules of grammar; but by presenting to him subjects suited to his

> comprehension, and encouraging him to say whatever occurs to him respecting them. Grammar follows afterwards; and he has in a great measure acquired his own language, before he commences the process of analysing (sic) it according to scientific principles.
>
> The method which we pursue, in teaching the art of written expression, is founded on the same principle. We have encouraged the pupil to write freely and boldly on a variety of subjects, which we consider well suited to his comprehension, his habits and associations. We trust that he has begun to feel somewhat *at home* in the use of his pen; and we believe that in consequence of this preparatory course, he will be much less embarrassed and disheartened than he otherwise would on entering upon a systematic course of exercises in the analysis and composition of sentences. (pp. 79-80)

While Morely includes a few pages on figurative language and style at the end of his 96-page book, the major emphasis in his book is on the practice of writing. While he doesn't follow the then common practice of beginning the study of writing with the study of grammar, and while he doesn't follow Walker's injunction to begin with memorizing the rules for writing, he does follow a Walker-like suggestion of giving the student a text. But unlike Walker, Morely makes the text available to the student: the student is asked first to answer questions in response to the text, then to write an essay from a skeleton or ellipsis of the story, then to write the story from memory in the student's own language. A significant leap from Walker occurs when Morely asks the student to write, "What lesson do you learn from the story?" (p. 9). Frost is significantly independent from Walker and from the better known textbook writers of his day in his insistence on starting not with rules for grammar or for writing, but with writing itself. The first and major section of his book is devoted to composing, the last two and smaller sections to sentence structure and figurative language. In Frost's "Concluding Remarks" at the end of his book, he quotes The Reverend J. Joyce who with the Reverends W. Shepherd and Lant Carpenter wrote a two-volume work in 1817 called *Systematic Education*: "Schemes have been given by Walker and others for theme-writing, but we feel strong doubts as to the propriety of shackling the minds of young people with those kinds of forms. If they attempt to write on a subject of imagination, let the imagination have fair and full play for the exercise of its powers . . . " (p. 120). Certainly Frost is interested not primarily in carefully laid out schemes for writing or formulas, but in the development of the writer's imagination.

Looking at the Table of Contents of several books graphically represents the difference between Frost and his colleagues writing at the same time. Here, for example, is the Table of Contents from Parker's 1832 Progressive Exercises, from Frost's 1839 *Easy Exercises*, and from Quackenbos' 1851 *First Lessons in Composition*.

2. Young writers cannot be expected to invent matter. Teachers "ought to expect nothing from tender youth but memory; judgment and invention will come by degrees, and ought not to be forced upon the delicate intellects of children too soon" (pp. 4-5).

As this second point announces, the key to Walker's composition pedagogy is memory, and contrary to the title's suggestion, the student is not--at least as a beginning writer--"writing themes" or "composing exercises" as we would understand those writerly activities. In Walker's pedagogy, the pupil must copy and memorize the rules for each kind of text; the teacher then reads a selected-from-the-book theme to the class, discusses the theme, reads it a second time, then instructs the pupil to write down--from memory--what he remembers of the written-by-an-adult text. The teacher corrects what the pupil has written, and has the pupil make a clean copy of the corrected text in order to "imprint the corrections in the pupil's mind, and insensibly make them his own" (p. 7). So persuaded is Walker that students cannot (should not?) begin by writing their own themes that he cautions against students having a copy of the book, for the student, knowing that the best text she could produce would be the one that most closely resembled the printed text, might suffer a strong temptation not to memorize what she had heard, but to copy the text that was in the book.

From the rules that Walker lays out for the section of his text called "Regular Subjects," we can assume that he believes students will eventually compose original essays. Connors notes that the rules, especially as re-formulated by Daniel Jaudon, are really an inventional strategy, asking students, for example, to define or explain their subject, to show the cause of it, to show whether the subject was ancient or modern ("Rhetoric of Explanation," pp. 204-206). While indeed that seems likely, it is nonetheless true, that in Walker's text--a text intended for young writers--he does not think students can begin learning to write by writing. William Russell, in his 1823 *Grammar of Composition*, seems to share Walker's opinion that students begin with memorizing rules and studying the writing of others before they begin to write original texts. Here is Russell in his "Introduction":

> When the pupil has reviewed the principles of composition, contained in the rules of rhetoric, he is prepared to apply them; but not, in the first instance, to exercises of his own. Such a transition is too abrupt, and too difficult for the minds of youth, and has generally the effect of embarrassing or disgusting them. The learner should be permitted first to trace the application of the rules of rhetoric in the writings of others. This stage of practice he finds easy and interesting. It also serves to prepare him for transferring to his own compositions the rules which he has been applying to those of other writers. (p. xiii)

It is in the face of directives like these that writers who hold an opposite point of view stand out. Frost is especially important here because of his pronounced difference.

Frost believed that at the same time that young students were learning grammatical principles, they could write original compositions. As noted earlier, his little book contains no elaborate rules; in addition, it contains no sample essays on abstract topics, and does not make memory part of the writing process. Instead, Frost begins by asking students to write in response to familiar pictures and scenes, giving what he calls, "a few simple directions as to the mode of rendering each object or scene the subject of a short essay in composition" (p. 9). In the first section on animals, for example, one of the pictures is entitled "A Cat that has stolen a Bird." The directions to the student read simply, "You have a very good hint in this picture for a short description and story. A single look at it will set your invention at work" (p. 14). Another woodcut is of a peacock, the direction reading, "Beauty and pride belong to the peacock. You can easily originate some good reflections on his character" (p. 17).

Another feature that is unique to Frost is his belief that students could begin writing with writing. Parker, to cite one of the better known textbook writers, for example, prescribed beginning with mental gymnastics. He directs students to follow a seven-step "study of the subject" before taking up the pen to record a single idea (pp. 68-69). Frost, on the other hand, encourages students to begin by writing "freely and boldly," and not to edit prematurely: "the first and most important thing," he writes, "is to be able to originate observations on the subjects presented and to express them in such language as [the writer's] feelings prompt. If he feel a constant solicitude lest he should make a trifling mistake, this will chill his feelings and give his writing an unpleasant air of stiffness and constraint" (pp. 58-59). So Frost is not only saying a student can write original essays, he is also saying

students can begin the writing process with writing. (show Frost transparency)

There is a great deal more to be said about Frost--especially about his debt to the Swiss reformer Pestalozzi and Pestalozzi's follower Elizabeth Mayo. The point I want to make here is that he was very certain students could write original compositions, even if their first attempts were very short.

While *Easy Exercises* was the first book that I know of that asked students to write in response to a visual prompt, an anonymous 1854 book entitled *The Illustrated Composition Book* uses a similar technique. Instead, however, of using many engravings as Frost does, this writer uses a handful of more elaborate sketches and gives up to eight prompts for each one. The first woodcut, for example, is of an Edenic scene. Like the other cuts in the book, it appears at the top of the page, surrounded by eight writing prompts (the creation story, gardens, animals, Adam and Eve, morning, happiness, or birds); the rest of the 8x10 page is left blank for the student to actually write on.

Both Frost and the author of *The Illustrated Composition Book* offer suggestions for field research as an heuristic: Frost invites students to interview people working in the trades and professions; the 1854 writer tells students: "You must study, converse, observe, go into the fields, into cities, into factories, on board ships, and wherever information can be gained" (p. 1). If students were no longer memorizing themes, and if they did not have large stores of information at hand (they were not all pursuing classical courses of study), they needed to get their information from other sources. Frost and others believed that students could do field research to discover subjects and evidence and could write in response to observation.

3

3. In Walker's pedagogy, there are no guidelines for or examples of personal or experiential writing.

In essence, Walker's text treats exposition, argument, and narrative. From today's vantage point, the absence of any reference to personal writing is conspicuous; even the sample narratives are of classical stories rather than stories that would emerge from the writer's life. Two of the sample narratives, for example, that students would memorize and then copy are "Fidelity Respected by Enemies" (an account of the Battle of Philippi) and "The false Happiness of Tyrants" (an account of Damocles and Dionysius). Sketches and Outlines (from which the student would reconstruct a narrative) are given for topics such as these: "Courage and Judgment United in Necessity" (the story of a Roman battle with the Albans) and "Friendship

Continuing after Death," (an account of the friendship of Titus Volumnius and Marcus Lucullus). In none of the essays the student hears is there any attempt to cite or value personal experience, and certainly not the experience of the student. It's as if the student is outside of the composing process, and is studying not writing, but scribal activity. In Walker's pedagogy, students never do get to what Walker calls "that terrible task of writing their own thoughts" (p. 166).

As Connors points out in his essay "Personal Writing Assignments," Walker's pedagogy was "was picked up and used by other authors, especially in the United States, where the common schools were teaching composition to an ever-larger percentage of children" (p. 171). The connection Connors draws is that "Newer composition texts also offered lists and lists of potential subject assignments, all of which were completely, utterly, relentlessly impersonal" (pp. 170-171). In fact, it may have been true that many of the better known books, such as Parker's (like Walker's), focused exclusively on the impersonal, but there's another point to be made, and that is that the lesser known writers of the first books, the books for introductory courses, did, indeed focus on personal writing.

Again, Frost is a key player here. In dozens of places in *Easy Exercises*, he asks students to write out of their personal experience. The same is true of the author of *The Illustrated Composition Book* and of Charles Brookfield in his *First Book in Composition*.(add Morely?) Clearly, by asking students to write about the familiar and the personal, these writers overcome the argument that students had nothing to say, and they invite students to write in their own voice, not in imitation of a learned, adult voice. Here are a few samples from from Frost. A picture entitled "Boy telling about his studies at school," directs the students, "You can here describe the picture and, then give an account of your own studies at school" (p. 21); another scene is entitled "Girls at school." The directions to the student are "Describe the picture fully. Say what you please about schools" (p. 22); another scene invites the students to "Describe your own ideas of a pleasant summer holiday" (24); and yet another asks "What kind of reading do you prefer?" (p. 25) What's so clear in these assignments, is that while the student is given a prompt, the student is absolutely encouraged to write out of her own experience. When Frost does provide a model for how students can respond to a picture, he also says, "The pupil can follow this or any similar course witht he following pictures, or write any other thoughts which they may suggest" (p. 10). The author of *The Illustrated Composition Book* also makes space for students to produce personal writing. Students are invited to write about the part of the world they would like to travel in, about their family to a friend, about a comet

they may have seen, about the farm where a friend lives. And there is personal writing in both Brookfield and Morely.

What Do the Interruptions Mean?

A number of First Books, therefore, in a number of ways interrupt and compicate the formulas and schemes laid out by Walker and his followers. The question that remains is What does it mean to investigate work--such as these First Books--that have not yet made their way into our history in any significant way? What I propose is a list of possible ways of reading these interruptions. There are no doubt other ways as well, but this is my reading of them for today. I will mention three of these ways rather quickly, and talk about one in a bit of detail:

1. *At least in the past, the educational hierarchy has assigned more value to what happens at higher levels of education than to what happens at lower levels.* In speculating about why the approach to composing advocated in some of these First Books was not widely known or broadly picked up and replicated in secondary and post-secondary writing classes, several thoughts come to mind. For the most part, writers of these books taught in the lower or secondary schools and did not have a ready made group of students who were preparing for teaching careers and thus likely to use these works in their teaching; in addition, there was no natural way for these writers and their work to influence the way writing was being taught in the universities (in educational hierarchies, new ideas have typically travelled down into the schools, not up into the universities); and finally, these writers did not write extensively about their work in the journals of the times.

2. *The contributions of other thinkers emerge and the presence of other zeitgeists is felt.* Some of the other forces at play, other ways of viewing the world, of viewing education can come forward with the investigation of new materials. From looking at Frost's text next to a book he edited by Elizabeth Mayo on object teaching, it is clear that it is from her work that he came to the idea of having students write in response to objects, of gathering ideas not from words, but from things. And it is also clear that the driving force behind the idea of object teaching was the Swiss reformer Johann Pestalozzi.

3. *The direct, hands-on treatment of writing instruction provided in these First Books provides an interesting corollary to the careers toward which these students were heading.* Common and secondary schools were preparing students for trades and professions; in *Easy Exercises*, students write stories and anecdotes about the usefulness of the farmer and the carpenter, about the ways in which haymaking supports all other trades and professions, about

beautiful edifices reared by the labor of the stone mason. In *The Illustrated Composition Book*, students are told that "all classes of people--farmers, mechanics, merchants, and professional men--must write so many letters, advertisements, notices, agreements," and that "the composition of [these texts] must be accurate to insure success in business" (p. 1). This attention to and appreciation of labor and the working class--and to writing as a means of successful participation in the world of work--were not apparent in the better known books and certainly not in the upper level books. One reading of this seems to be that students in the lower grades, some of whom were clearly not heading toward college, studied some of the writing techniques we value today.

4. *Change is often prefigured on the margins.* In a wonderful dissertation on margins in a science class, Ann Haley Oliphant, following Wendell Berry, says this about those places on the earth that are at the edges, the edge of a field, the edge of the sea: margins in the natural world are often dismissed as unimportant or irrelevant; margins represent less stable, less predictable environments; margins can only be described in relation to something else. It is also true that, in the margins, new varieties of life are constantly being created through unanticipated, uncontrolled, and unplanned cross-pollination and intermingling; that the richness in activity, meaning, and responsiveness occurring in the margins may not be easily detected; and that observers must get in deep in the margins to sense the full value of these diverse places.

I want to argue that the books that I'm looking at that interrupt or destabilize the mainline patterns of instruction are indeed books at the edges, books on the margins. I would argue that what makes them marginal is that they were written by little known writers, they often had a short shelf life, they were used with beginning students, often children. I would further argue that like natural margins, they are the site of new varieties of life and that they represent not a monoculture, but a polyculture, a culture that supports life of all kinds and celebrates diversity and freedom, they are places of possibility.

[illegible] one important value of looking at little known first books is that they pointing to a site of inquiry that hasn't yet received much study from historians. Understandably, people doing historical study begin at the center (however that is perceived), not at the margins. In the margins, however, we can find passages from *Easy Exercises* to illustrate James Berlin's notions of expressionist or romantic pedagogy, passages that anticipate the kind of free writing that we know of from Peter Elbow, passages that warn against premature editing that we have from Mike Rose. And certainly, writing exercises and assignments from any number

of little known First Books can revise Robert Connors' claim that there was an absence of personal writing in early 19th century composition texts. One of the things that happens when you wander around in the margins is that you see from a different distance, up close and in deep as it were, and that makes different things visible.

Conclusion

It seems to me that trying to uncover traces of the history of writing instruction is like looking for the feathers of a lost bird. From the feathers we can tell something about the bird, but hard as we try, we can never recapture the bird. What we have are various writers saying, it looked like this, it looked like that. And what quickly becomes clear, is that we're looking not at one bird, but at many birds, and that people see them in different lights and from different perspectives. A reading of First Books, those books that were written for young writers and that often interrupted the patterns of better known upper level books, suggests that there are other feathers, other birds waiting to be glimpsed. Henry Giroux writes, there is not a single past that is the object for memory, "there are multiple pasts" (p. 8). I would simply speak to the delight of catching a new bird on the wing, a bird that lives at the edge, or if you will, a bird that lives not at the center of the field, but at the margins.

"nailing jelly to the wall" Reading Group

young writers into courses

unearthed new Evidence

look at different distance see diff. things

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Some Thoughts About Doing History

Contemporary historians and historiographers explain that history is not the objective or positivistic record of events that it once seemed: "a record of truth for the instruction of mankind: (Blair, p. 398b). Repeatedly, they draw the distinction between history as event (*res gestae*) and history as account (*historia rerum gestarum*) (Stanford, p. 1), between history as documentary and history as rhetoric (LaCapra, pp. 15-44). Hayden White goes so far as to say that "history is an intellectual enterprise akin to rhetoric or poetic (LaCapra, p. 33)" and the French historian Paul Veyne suggests that history is a "true novel." In another place, Veyne suggests that history is a city, and that when we do history, "we visit what is still visible of that city, the traces of it that remain." While these students of history use different tropes to make their point, they would seem to agree with Michael Stanford that "a historian and a recording angel are two very different things" (*The Nature of Historical Knowledge*, p. 127): the historian simply can't get it all.

In composition studies today, ~~history is an important area of inquiry, and~~ scholars such as Berlin, Connors, Crowley, Halloran, Horner, Johnson, Murphy, Stewart, and Vitanza have traced for us some insights into the history of teaching writing and rhetoric in American schools and colleges. As they do their work, they repeatedly and generously say that their findings are tentative, that there is much more investigation to be done, that future study will turn up new ways of understanding what has gone before. The call is to search for materials that have not yet surfaced: student writing, other unpublished materials, little known texts, little known writers A likely temptation--certainly it was mine when I began to look at little known 19th century texts--is to think that with the recovery of new materials, those of us interested in historical work can piece together the patches or fill in the spaces, and that, working together, we can write a single, unified history of writing instruction in this country. In fact, I would like to suggest that all we can find are traces and fragments, or, if you will, the feathers of a lost bird, and that we miss the point of contemporary historians if we think that from the feathers we can reconstruct the bird, or even worse, that there is only one bird.

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multidimensionality--and that in making this space, we are more likely to take an honest stab at representing what was real. Henry Giroux makes the point that "traditions should be valued for their attempts to name the partial, the particular, and the specific"; he goes on to say that "postmodernism argues for a view of history that is decentered, discontinuous, fragmented, and plural" (*Border Crossings*, p. 122).

Early and Mid 19th Century "First Books"

So to turn to the particular subject of this paper: early 19th century writing texts. In Robert Connors' essay "The Rhetoric of Explanation," he documents that the text that had the most influence on other composition books in the early 19th century was John Walker's *The Teacher's Assistant*. Originally published in London in 1801, the book's 1810 American edition made Walker, according to Connors, "the exemplar for a whole school of composition pedagogy," a pedagogy that Connors claims most secondary texts used between 1815-1840 (p. 205). What I am interested in here is a sampling of books that interrupt or complicate the patterns of Walker's pedagogy and in some ways anticipate contemporary pedagogy. It's worthwhile noting that while any generalization is fraught with peril, it seems as if the books that most often veered away from Walker were what I call First Books, books for beginners or young composers, books intended to introduce students to composition. In "The Reform Tradition in Nineteenth-Century Composition Teaching," William Woods argues that it is with books for young students that education made its first move from discipline centered to student centered teaching and learning (p. 387).

The complete title of Walker's book is *The Teacher's Assistant in English Composition; or Easy Rules for Writing Themes and Composing Exercises on Subjects Proper for the Improvement of Youth of Both Sexes at School*. Like the titles of many early 19th century texts, Walker's title elaborates on (rather than simply names) what he is about in his book: giving rules, or what came to be thought of as principles of composition. For each of the book's four main sections--Themes, Regular Subjects, Easy Essays, and Narrative--Walker offers a page or two of explanation. In the section on Themes, for example, he defines a theme as "the proving of some truth" and then lists the six-part proof: the proposition, the reason, the confirmation, the simile, the example, the testimony, and the conclusion. The major part of the chapter then consists of 21 sample themes, with each of the six-proofs labelled for each theme. Each of the 21 themes is based on an aphorism ("Well-begun is half done," "Nip sin in the bud," "No art can be acquired without rules," etc.) and relies on abstract ideas, assumes a shared world view and moral code, and cites authorities

Frost = heart of counter voice

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Walker's Principles--and the Ways They Are Challenged

As in many early books, the central directives to teachers about teaching the composing process are articulated in the "Preface," and elaborated in the "Introduction." Different readers, I'm sure, might name or see these points differently, but the points from Walker that for me are central and that I am choosing to represent are four. The italics are mine.

1. The place from which the student begins writing is listening to the teacher read and explain the rules (in prose and in verse) for a particular kind of discourse. The student copies the rules as she hears them and then commits them to memory.

As anyone who has looked even briefly at early composition textbooks, the rule was to start with the rules, not with practice. In 1935, Emily Besig wrote a dissertation at Cornell entitled "The History of Composition Teaching in the Secondary Schools before 1900." Two points she makes in that work are these: (1) that composition and grammar were both introduced into the American school about 1750 and that Franklin's Academy in Philadelphia was the first school to recognize composition as an important part of the curriculum, and (2) that the study and teaching of composition lagged behind the study and teaching of grammar for three reasons.

Besig argues that most textbook writers, following Lindley Murray, believed that the study of grammar was the necessary beginning place for literacy practices, Murray writing in the Preface to his 1795 grammar "English Grammar is the art of speaking and writing the English language with propriety" (quoted in Besig, p. 23). Thus there was no place for composition until the child, having begun her literacy study with the "word," was ready to move to more complex forms, a process that invariably took years. I find this same sentiment in Rippingham's 1816 *Rules for English Composition*, Rippingham writing, "The commencement in the art of literary composition, requires nothing more than a gentle exercise of reason. . . . The theory and idiom of the language must first be attained; for who can express his ideas by words the relative dependency of which he has not ascertained." (Rippingham, p. B2). Besig suggests that a second reason that the study of composition lagged behind the study of grammar is that the primary teaching method, following the study of Latin, was to memorize and recite rules. A new method would be required for the teaching of composition. Finally, Besig argues that because school masters had so many subjects to teach (she cites one teacher

in East New Jersey who was assigned to teach English, Latin, Greek, arithmetick, algebra, trigonometry and sailing), they of course preferred "hearing rules of grammar to correcting themes" (Besig, p. 24). Following this emphasis on memorizing and rules, it is not surprising that when composition began to make its way into the curriculum, it was after the student had spent considerable time on grammar. Eventually students generated their own sentences to practice the use of a grammatical principle (Parker insists on this), eventually they wrote from teacher-given outlines, eventually they wrote original essays, but initially, learning the composing process began with memorizing rules and Walker's text is a principal demonstration of that belief.

Two writers who interrupt these patterns are Charles Morely in his *A Practical Guide to Composition* (1839) and John Frost in his *Easy Exercises for Composition* (1839); Morely taught at the Green-Street Seminary in Albany and Frost taught at Central High School in Philadelphia. Both of them argue for a more natural way of learning to write than was common in other books. In his Preface, Morely writes, "Children and youth are taught to spell and read what they do not understand, to define without understanding the definitions, and to commit to memory the words of grammar, rhetoric, . . . while scarcely a sentence is understood. . . . The pupil should first gain thoughts, clear conceptions of things, and then proceed to learn their names--this is nature's process with the infant . . . " (p. iv). In a similar vein, Frost argues for a more natural way of learning to write:

> In teaching a child to express himself freely and naturally in conversation, we do not begin by systematically inculcating the rules of grammar; but by presenting to him subjects suited to his comprehension, and encouraging him to say whatever occurs to him respecting them. Grammar follows afterwards; and he has in a great measure acquired his own language, before he commences the process of analysing (sic) it according to scientific principles.
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> The method which we pursue, in teaching the art of written expression, is founded on the same principle. We have encouraged the pupil to write freely and boldly on a variety of subjects, which we consider well suited to his comprehension, his habits and associations. We trust that he has begun to feel somewhat *at home* in the use of his pen; and we believe that in consequence of this preparatory course, he will be much less embarrassed and disheartened than he otherwise would on entering upon a systematic course of

exercises in the analysis and composition of sentences. (pp. 79-80)

While Morely includes a few pages on figurative language and style at the end of his 96-page book, the major emphasis in his book is on the practice of writing. While he doesn't follow the then common practice of beginning the study of writing with the study of grammar, and while he doesn't follow Walker's injunction to begin with memorizing the rules for writing, he does follow a Walker-like suggestion of giving the student a text. But unlike Walker, Morely makes the text available to the student: the student is asked first to answer questions in response to the text, then to write an essay from a skeleton or ellipsis of the story, then to write the story from memory in the student's own language. A significant leap from Walker occurs when Morely asks the student to write, "What lesson do you learn from the story?" (p. 9). Frost is significantly independent from Walker and from the better known textbook writers of his day in his insistence on starting not with rules for grammar or for writing, but with writing itself. The first and major section of his book is devoted to composing, the last two and smaller sections to sentence structure and figurative language. In Frost's "Concluding Remarks" at the end of his book, he quotes The Reverend J. Joyce who with the Reverends W. Shepherd and Lant Carpenter wrote a two-volume work in 1817 called *Systematic Education*: "Schemes have been given by Walker and others for theme-writing, but we feel strong doubts as to the propriety of shackling the minds of young people with those kinds of forms. If they attempt to write on a subject of imagination, let the imagination have fair and full play for the exercise of its powers . . . " (p. 120). Certainly Frost is interested not primarily in carefully laid out schemes for writing or formulas, but in the development of the writer's imagination.

Looking at the Table of Contents of several books graphically represents the difference between Frost and his colleagues writing at the same time. Here, for example, is the Table of Contents from Parker's 1832 Progressive Exercises, from Frost's 1839 *Easy Exercises*, and from Quackenbos' 1851 *First Lessons in Composition*.

2. Young writers cannot be expected to invent matter. Teachers "ought to expect nothing from tender youth but memory; judgment and invention will come by degrees, and ought not to be forced upon the delicate intellects of children too soon" (pp. 4-5).

As this second point announces, the key to Walker's composition pedagogy is memory, and contrary to the title's suggestion, the student is not--at least as a beginning

writer--"writing themes" or "composing exercises" as we would understand those writerly activities. In Walker's pedagogy, the pupil must copy and memorize the rules for each kind of text; the teacher then reads a selected-from-the-book theme to the class, discusses the theme, reads it a second time, then instructs the pupil to write down--from memory--what he remembers of the written-by-an-adult text. The teacher corrects what the pupil has written, and has the pupil make a clean copy of the corrected text in order to "imprint the corrections in the pupil's mind, and insensibly make them his own" (p. 7). So persuaded is Walker that students cannot (should not?) begin by writing their own themes that he cautions against students having a copy of the book, for the student, knowing that the best text she could produce would be the one that most closely resembled the printed text, might suffer a strong temptation not to memorize what she had heard, but to copy the text that was in the book.

When I first found the section added to later editions of Walker's text called "Hints for Correcting and Improving Juvenile Compositions" (pp. 221-239), I thought that this might be the section in which students were taught to write their own themes; but, not so. In this section, teachers are told how to work with students in such areas as structure, redundancy, word choice, but the theme or essay the student is "writing," is still a version of the text that the teacher originally read to the class.

From the rules that Walker lays out for the section of his text called "Regular Subjects," we can assume that he believes students will eventually compose original essays. Connors notes that the rules, especially as re-formulated by Daniel Jaudon, are really an inventional strategy, asking students, for example, to define or explain their subject, to show the cause of it, to show whether the subject was ancient or modern ("Rhetoric of Explanation," pp. 204-206). While indeed that seems likely, it is nonetheless true, that in Walker's text--a text intended for young writers--he does not think students can begin learning to write by writing. William Russell, in his 1823 *Grammar of Composition*, seems to share Walker's opinion that students begin with memorizing rules and studying the writing of others before they begin to write original texts. Here is Russell in his "Introduction":

> When the pupil has reviewed the principles of composition, contained in the rules of rhetoric, he is prepared to apply them; but not, in the first instance, to exercises of his own. Such a transition is too abrupt, and too difficult for the minds of youth, and has generally the effect of embarrassing or disgusting them. The learner should be permitted first to trace the application

> of the rules of rhetoric in the writings of others. This stage of practice he finds easy and interesting. It also serves to prepare him for transferring to his own compositions the rules which he has been applying to those of other writers. (p. xiii)

It is in the face of directives like these that writers who hold an opposite point of view stand out. Frost is especially important here because of his pronounced difference.

Frost believed that at the same time that young students were learning grammatical principles, they could write original compositions. As noted earlier, his little book contains no elaborate rules; in addition, it contains no sample essays on abstract topics, and does not make memory part of the writing process. Instead, Frost begins by asking students to write in response to familiar pictures and scenes, giving what he calls, "a few simple directions as to the mode of rendering each object or scene the subject of a short essay in composition" (p. 9). In the first section on animals, for example, one of the pictures is entitled "A Cat that has stolen a Bird." The directions to the student read simply, "You have a very good hint in this picture for a short description and story. A single look at it will set your invention at work" (p. 14). Another woodcut is of a peacock, the direction reading, "Beauty and pride belong to the peacock. You can easily originate some good reflections on his character" (p. 17).

Another feature that is unique to Frost is his belief that students could begin writing with writing. Parker, to cite one of the better known textbook writers, for example, prescribed beginning with mental gymnastics. He directs students to follow a seven-step "study of the subject" before taking up the pen to record a single idea (pp. 68-69). Frost, on the other hand, encourages students to begin by writing "freely and boldly," and not to edit prematurely: "the first and most important thing," he writes, "is to be able to originate observations on the subjects presented and to express them in such language as [the writer's] feelings prompt. If he feel a constant solicitude lest he should make a trifling mistake, this will chill his feelings and give his writing an unpleasant air of stiffness and constraint" (pp. 58-59). So Frost is not only saying a student can write original essays, he is also saying students can begin the writing process with writing. (show Frost transparency)

There is a great deal more to be said about Frost--especially about his debt to the Swiss reformer Pestalozzi and Pestalozzi's follower Elizabeth Mayo. The point I want to make here is that he was very certain students could

write original compositions, even if their first attempts were very short.

While *Easy Exercises* was the first book that I know of that asked students to write in response to a visual prompt, an anonymous 1854 book entitled *The Illustrated Composition Book* uses a similar technique. Instead, however, of using many engravings as Frost does, this writer uses a handful of more elaborate sketches and gives up to eight prompts for each one. The first woodcut, for example, is of an Edenic scene. Like the other cuts in the book, it appears at the top of the page, surrounded by eight writing prompts (the creation story, gardens, animals, Adam and Eve, morning, happiness, or birds); the rest of the 8x10 page is left blank for the student to actually write on.

Both Frost and the author of *The Illustrated Composition Book* offer suggestions for field research as an heuristic: Frost invites students to interview people working in the trades and professions; the 1854 writer tells students: "You must study, converse, observe, go into the fields, into cities, into factories, on board ships, and wherever information can be gained" (p. 1). If students were no longer memorizing themes, and if they did not have large stores of information at hand (they were not all pursuing classical courses of study), they needed to get their information from other sources. Frost and others believed that students could do field research to discover subjects and evidence and could write in response to observation.

3. In Walker's pedagogy, there are no guidelines for or examples of personal or experiential writing.

In essence, Walker's text treats exposition, argument, and narrative. From today's vantage point, the absence of any reference to personal writing is conspicuous; even the sample narratives are of classical stories rather than stories that would emerge from the writer's life. Two of the sample narratives, for example, that students would memorize and then copy are "Fidelity Respected by Enemies" (an account of the Battle of Philippi) and "The false Happiness of Tyrants" (an account of Damocles and Dionysius). Sketches and Outlines (from which the student would reconstruct a narrative) are given for topics such as these: "Courage and Judgment United in Necessity" (the story of a Roman battle with the Albans) and "Friendship Continuing after Death," (an account of the friendship of Titus Volumnius and Marcus Lucullus). In none of the essays the student hears is there any attempt to cite or value personal experience, and certainly not the experience of the student. It's as if the student is outside of the composing process, and is studying not writing, but scribal activity. In Walker's pedagogy, students never do get to what Walker

calls "that terrible task of writing their own thoughts" (p. 166).

As Connors points out in his essay "Personal Writing Assignments," Walker's pedagogy was "was picked up and used by other authors, especially in the United States, where the common schools were teaching composition to an ever-larger percentage of children" (p. 171). The connection Connors draws is that "Newer composition texts also offered lists and lists of potential subject assignments, all of which were completely, utterly, relentlessly impersonal" (pp. 170-171). In fact, it may have been true that many of the better known books, such as Parker's (like Walker's), focused exclusively on the impersonal, but there's another point to be made, and that is that the lesser known writers of the first books, the books for introductory courses, did, indeed focus on personal writing.

Again, Frost is a key player here. In dozens of places in *Easy Exercises*, he asks students to write out of their personal experience. The same is true of the author of *The Illustrated Composition Book* and of Charles Brookfield in his *First Book in Composition*.(add Morely?) Clearly, by asking students to write about the familiar and the personal, these writers overcome the argument that students had nothing to say, and they invite students to write in their own voice, not in imitation of a learned, adult voice. Here are a few samples from from Frost. A picture entitled "Boy telling about his studies at school," directs the students, "You can here describe the picture and, then give an account of your own studies at school" (p. 21); another scene is entitled "Girls at school." The directions to the student are "Describe the picture fully. Say what you please about schools" (p. 22); another scene invites the students to "Describe your own ideas of a pleasant summer holiday" (24); and yet another asks "What kind of reading do you prefer?" (p. 25) What's so clear in these assignments, is that while the student is given a prompt, the student is absolutely encouraged to write out of her own experience. When Frost does provide a model for how students can respond to a picture, he also says, "The pupil can follow this or any similar course witht he following pictures, or write any other thoughts which they may suggest" (p. 10). The author of *The Illustrated Composition Book* also makes space for students to produce personal writing. Students are invited to write about the part of the world they would like to travel in, about their family to a friend, about a comet they may have seen, about the farm where a friend lives. And there is personal writing in both Brookfield and Morely.

What Do the Interruptions Mean?

A number of First Books, therefore, in a number of ways interrupt and compicate the formulas and schemes laid out by

Walker and his followers. The question that remains is What does it mean to investigate work--such as these First Books--that have not yet made their way into our history in any significant way? What I propose is a list of possible ways of reading these complications.

1. *History as account is an organic process.* Expecting the story to keep changing is perhaps the most obvious way to integrate new materials into our way of understanding the history of teaching composition. I've now heard several versions of the story of the Dean of a celebrated medical school welcoming new students with words something like these: "Ladies and Gentlemen, You are about to embark on a rigorous course of study for many years. One thing you need to know is that by the time you graduate, half of what you will have learned here will be obsolete. The problem is we don't know which half." I don't know that our historical knowledge changes that rapidly, but change it does as more and more people work in the area, as new materials emerge, as new readings of old materials emerge, as changes in the culture make their impact felt on our work.

One important value of looking closely at these First Books is that they expand our knowledge of the history of teaching writing by pointing to a site of inquiry that hasn't yet received much study from historians: the lower schools. Clearly, there is a history here, and clearly it has an interconnectedness with the secondary and post-secondary teaching of writing; we just haven't yet explored enough of that history or its impact on other levels of education.

One could, for example, use passages from *Easy Exercises* to illustrate James Berlin's notions of expressionist or romantic pedagogy. There are also passages in that text which, one could argue, anticipate the kind of free writing that we know of from Peter Elbow or the warning against premature editing that we have from Mike Rose. And certainly, writing exercises and assignments from any number of little known First Books can revise Robert Connors' claim that there was an absence of personal writing in early 19th century composition texts.

2. *At least in the past, the educational hierarchy has assigned more value to what happens at higher levels of education than to what happens at lower levels.* In speculating about why the approach to composing advocated in some of these First Books was not widely known or broadly picked up and replicated in secondary and post-secondary writing classes, several thoughts come to mind. For the most part, writers of these books taught in the lower or secondary schools and did not have a ready made group of students who were preparing for teaching careers and thus likely to use these works in their teaching; in addition, there was no natural way for these writers and their work to influence the way writing was being taught in the universities (in educational hierarchies, new ideas have

typically travelled down into the schools, not up into the universities); and finally, these writers did not write extensively about their work in the journals of the times.

3. *The contributions of other thinkers emerge and the presence of other zeitgeists is felt.* Some of the other forces at play, other ways of viewing the world, of viewing education can come forward with the investigation of new materials. From looking at Frost's text next to a book he edited by Elizabeth Mayo on object teaching, it is clear that it is from her work that he came to the idea of having students write in response to objects, of gathering ideas not from words, but from things. And it is also clear that the driving force behind the idea of object teaching was the Swiss reformer Johann Pestalozzi.

4. *The direct, hands-on treatment of writing instruction provided in these First Books provides an interesting corollary to the careers toward which these students were heading.* Common and secondary schools were preparing students for trades and professions; in *Easy Exercises*, students write stories and anecdotes about the usefulness of the farmer and the carpenter, about the ways in which haymaking supports all other trades and professions, about beautiful edifices reared by the labor of the stone mason. In *The Illustrated Composition Book*, students are told that "all classes of people--farmers, mechanics, merchants, and professional men--must write so many letters, advertisements, notices, agreements," and that "the composition of [these texts] must be accurate to insure success in business" (p. 1). This attention to and appreciation of labor and the working class--and to writing as a means of successful participation in the world of work--were not apparent in the better known books and certainly not in the upper level books. One reading of this seems to be that students in the lower grades, some of whom were clearly not heading toward college, studied some of the writing techniques we value today.

Conclusion

It seems to me that trying to uncover traces of the history of writing instruction is like looking for the feathers of a lost bird. From the feathers we can tell something about the bird, but hard as we try, we can never recapture the bird. What we have are various writers saying, it looked like this, it looked like that. And what quickly becomes clear, is that we're looking not at one bird, but at many birds, and that people see them in different lights and from different perspectives. A reading of First Books, those books that were written for young writers and that often interrupted the patterns of better known upper level books, suggests that there are other feathers, other birds waiting to be glimpsed. Henry Giroux

writes, there is not a single past that is the object for memory, "there are multiple pasts" (p. 8). I would simply speak to the delight of catching a new bird on the wing.

Why is it they've said there's no personal

October 9th

Thursday, 1 October
Dear Friends:

Here is my first crack at writing about the material I worked with this past winter/spring. I need to use some version of this for the New Hampshire conference, so it has some talky sounds to it, but I am also looking toward an essay to send out, so it has some of those features too. I look forward to your feedback, esp. about the overall design--and the main point of the paper. Right now I seem to be using Frost, et.al. to say something about history. Do I want to leave it that way? I'm not even sure what other questions I want to ask you, but they're the big ones. I'm leaving this single spaced because I think that makes it easier to see the proportion, overall design, etc.

Oct. 5
See you all Monday, 7:30 pm, at my house, to look at Marjorie's paper (forthcoming) and this. I'll make some tea and coffee. And there will probably be a chocolate cookie somewhere around.

♡

Lucy