

To Write Well Means to Rewrite

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In Plato's *Crito*, Socrates proves that what is important is not to live but to live well.¹ More recently, Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges maintained in one of his many interviews that what is important is not to read but to re-read. If we look beyond living and reading to writing, neither Socrates nor Borges as determined conversationalists might be the expert we would consult. Socrates wrote nothing, leaving his philosophy to be dramatized in his star student's dialogues. Borges, doomed to progressive blindness, dictated his many short works to his mother and others. Yet we might conflate the advice of these two worthies into a golden rule of writing. If better than living is living well, what is important in writing is to write well. Then, as with reading and re-reading, what is important in order to write well is to rewrite.²

Writers at AUP and elsewhere learn this rule as frosh and come to apply it often before graduation and after. The prolific African-American writer W.E.B. DuBois wrote in his freshman composition class at Harvard in 1890: "I have something to say to the world and I have taken English 12 [comparable to AUP's EN 120, adjusted to reflect inflation] in order to say it well."³ To do so, he knew he would have to learn and he did: what he learned was to say well what he had to say to the world by writing well. For as Samuel Johnson reminds us,

1 Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Treddenick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 87.

2 According to Borges, any writing paradoxically constitutes a form of rewriting, because each writer necessarily builds upon the work of those before him whom he has read...or not. In that sense at least, Borges did say that to write is precisely to rewrite, notes Emir Rodriguez-Monegal in *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (NY: Dutton, 1978) 78, for every author rewrites what has been written by his predecessors. But if he is to succeed as a writer, he would do well also to rewrite his own work!

3 Cited in John McWhorter, *Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care* (New York: Gotham, 2003) 145-46.

“What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure.” If writing is to last, it must be alive and kicking, like those dead authors Dr. Johnson recommended we read in their immortal books.⁴ The best critical writing is not usually found in the first draft.

From medievals to moderns, great English writers may not always have known what they wanted to say until they saw what they were saying. Malcolm Godden suggests that in the fourteenth century William Langland in *Piers Plowman* “may have understood what he meant to say only by writing it.”⁵ Closer to us, E.M. Forster, author of *A Room with a View* (1908) and *A Passage to India* (1924) among other novels, reportedly wondered, “How can I tell what I think until I see what I say?” To discover what we mean and then to say it requires revision, not in the historian’s sense of revisionism, which is the unwriting of history, but in the writer’s sense, namely, the rewriting and thereby the refining of our ideas through constant revision, until we say what we mean to say. That is, until writing becomes “as good as it gets,” as Jack Nicholson put it in a film a few years back.

It is a little known anecdote of twentieth-century American literature that two iconic fiction writers first met in the classroom. Medievalist and novelist John Gardner used to teach a writing class in which future short-story master Raymond Carver was a lucky student. According to Carver, a student writing sample “might have to be revised ten times in the course of the semester for Gardner to be satisfied with it. It was a basic tenet of his that a writer found what

4 Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* further reports what he said of infatuations with contemporary authors who have not yet stood the test of time: “All infidel writers drop into oblivion, when personal connections and the floridness of novelty are gone,” cited in Marc Temmer, *Samuel Johnson and Three Infidels: Rousseau, Voltaire, Diderot* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1988) vii.

5 Malcolm Godden, *The Making of Piers Plowman* (London: Longman, 1990) 102.

he wanted to say in the ongoing process of *seeing* what he'd said. And this seeing, or seeing more clearly, came through revision. He *believed* in revision, endless revision; it was something very close to his heart and something he felt was vital for writers, at whatever stage of their development. And he never seemed to lose patience rereading..."⁶

The mastery of mechanics and strategies comes from that repeated revision. Writing is ultimately a lifelong project. It takes practice, grows on the author, becomes easier with the years, but always takes time. That means many prewrites and rewrites, much reworking and polishing. Perhaps not one hundred times but certainly "Vingt fois sur le métier remettez votre ouvrage," counseled Boileau.⁷ Hemingway was of the same school: indeed, he claimed to have rewritten some of his Paris stories two hundred times. I wish I could rewrite just one more time some passages in my own published books and articles, but I am too busy rewriting the ones I have not yet published.

My recommendations to students reflect the same cumulative approach to writing. A young writer will have much to say, sometimes that is important and creative to say, but must still take the time to

6 Raymond Carver, "Foreword," in John Gardner, *On Becoming a Novelist*, (New York: Harper, 1983) xiv..

7 Boileau, *Art Poétique, Chant Premier*:

Hâtez-vous lentement, et, sans perdre courage,
Vingt fois sur le métier remettez votre ouvrage :
Polissez-le sans cesse, et le repolissez;
Ajoutez quelquefois, et souvent effacez.

Less often cited are the lines which follow on the fate of good ideas poorly expressed:

C'est peu qu'en un ouvrage où les fautes fourmillent

Des traits d'esprit semés de temps en temps pétillent. (171-74)

Jean-Clarence Lambert and François Mizrachi, eds., *L'Art Poétique de Boileau, suivi de L'Épître aux Pisons (Art poétique) d'Horace et d'une anthologie de la poésie préclassique en France (1600-1670)* (Paris: U.G.E., 1966) 27.

say it well. All too frequently there is substance to an argument but expression is not yet effective or refined in presentation. In polishing an essay which has potential, the writer will discover through practice how to probe deeper and rewrite carefully to flatter the analysis. As poet Stéphane Mallarmé explained to painter Edgar Degas, poetry is written not with ideas but with words: “avec des mots.” Or as Vladimir Nabokov once declared, “Ideas are hogwash.” Perhaps he said “balderdash”: I don’t recall with which apt word he said exactly what he meant. What he meant, of course, was that the best ideas, if not well expressed, are not good at all. If they are not effectively communicated, they will be lost because they are misunderstood . . . or not understood at all. Among my mentor Roman Jakobson’s list of the functions of language, the top of the pyramid remains communication, not noise, which is itself the realm of the phatic function at the bottom of the hierarchy. That’s why the rewriting becomes more essential than the writing: to guarantee that we communicate those all-important ideas correctly, effectively, convincingly.

Last year in one writing class, three of my students rewrote at home all of their in-class essays as often as needed until both parties were finally satisfied with the result: after four or five or six revisions, each definitive essay had earned its *A*. Their essays, individually and collectively, generally became better each time. Sometimes, the first few times, the grade may have gone down before it went up if less time and care were invested in rewriting than had been spent in writing: the issues at whatever levels had not registered or been understood and so were compounded rather than controlled. But once the recurrent problems were recognized and addressed, their days were numbered. Rather than make the same errors over and over *ad nauseam*, students discovered future possible avenues of improvement, progressing from grammar to expression to style. With time those paths would in

turn be followed. The students' third essays invariably needed fewer reworkings to reach their burnished form. And the fourth in-class essay, a.k.a. the final exam, was rewritten only to the degree that it was re-read and triple-checked by each author until it was as good as could be in a closed-book, examination setting.

Rewriting takes time. But the more one invests one's time, each time, the shorter and more productive the effort will be the next time. Write your best *au premier jet*, then rewrite and rewrite yet again until your draft is better still. Only your very best will ever be good enough.