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Reflection in the Writing Classroom

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Reflective Texts, Reflective Writers

Only connect.

E. M. Forster

What coherent whole can I make of snow on a beach?

Richard Rosenblatt

MY FRIEND CHARLES SCHUSTER ASKED ME ONCE, WHEN I BEGAN TO talk about reflection, “Are we looking for the reflection in the writing,” he asked, “or reflection apart from the writing?”

“*Bothand*,” I replied.

Bothand is the correct answer, I still think, but here I’ll take the opportunity to elaborate more fully. Such elaboration teaches something else we need to know about reflection. After that, I’ll over/view the larger argument about reflection, issue some cautions, and articulate some questions.

The conclusion of this text, of course, provides its own points of departure.

What does a reflective text look like? What about it makes it reflective? Tough questions, these are, and I’m not sure that I have the answers to them. I certainly don’t have a definitive reply. But during the last several years as I’ve pursued reflection into every nook and cranny, I’ve found myself *noticing* reflective texts. My students’, of course, but as we do with anything we become newly aware of and captivated by, I’ve also been seeing reflective texts in all kinds of reading materials, from Sherwin Nuland’s *How We Die: Reflections on Life’s Final Chapter*, to John Krakauer’s *Into the Wild* and *Into Thin Air*, to shorter texts, also in the mainstream media, in magazines like

TIME and *Harper's*, and even sometimes in my local paper, *The Charlotte Observer*.

I first became aware of reflective texts in the mainstream media as a function of looking for them but failing: finding texts that, in spite of their good writing, didn't suffice as reflective texts. Thus, early on, I located reflection by its absence: in a text in the July 1995 issue of *Harper's* written by G. J. Meyer, "Dancing with Headhunters: Scenes from the Downsized Life." Meyer has lost his job (in this case as a public relations/communications executive), he has a year's severance pay to find another job, and the pickings, he finds, are thin indeed. He is unemployed for over a year. The experience prompts a vivid and smart narrative of the experience as well as a good deal of reflection: about how he grew up, went to school, and found himself earning annually a tidy six-figure sum. The problem with the text is that this reflection wasn't very reflective at all: though Meyer writes well, what he doesn't do is every bit as remarkable. He doesn't position himself except within the rather small community of executives. He doesn't see that perhaps getting paid a six-figure sum for hawking seed corn or farm implements is unreasonable, and *that's* why his former employer doesn't need him anymore. He doesn't make the connection between his situation and that of an unskilled laborer who has also lost his job permanently—in spite of his having been very good at it. He doesn't "get" the larger economic picture: the capitalistic system that rewards and punishes arbitrarily. Ultimately and most personally, he doesn't see how to rewrite this story—*his own story*—that has gone so awry.

The problem, then, is that Meyer cannot invent a new story. All he's able to do is cling to the old story, to his narrative of progress rudely derailed. He cannot get outside himself to see the contradictions, the associations, the incongruities that inhabit the new story he is living but that he still doesn't quite grasp. Indeed, as well-written as they may be, these reflections are little more than the reverberations of victimhood. It would be interesting, informative, and instructive to know, for example, what Meyer would make of his story for other readers—say, those of *Mother Jones* or the *Village Voice*. But neither story-making nor reflection is in evidence. In sum, Meyer's writing may be "good" in the conventional sense of the word: it is clear, its images are evocative, it's got a point of view that is consistently developed. On the other hand, that's part of its problem, for me: *it's got a single point of view, it's got a single story, and it's got a single voice*. The

author seems unable to generate multiple versions of his own (life) text. So: multiplicity and community as keys to reflection, to whatever it is that I value in reflection, in reflective texts. I had made a start.

As I said in chapter four, however, it's only minimally instructive to locate what you value by its absence. Better to locate it by means of presence. I also thought that identifying reflective texts would prove useful in multiple ways: to make reflection *visible* and valuable—ie, *something to be valued*; to illustrate what I meant by reflection—by pointing to a wide range of texts, and I thought I would learn more about reflection in the process myself. I found the first in the spring of 1996, a short text authored for *TIME* by David Gelertner, one of the Unabomber's victims, on the occasion of Theodore Kaczynsky's arrest: "A Victim Reflects on the Evil Coward." In this text, a prelude to a book on the subject that Gelertner has just published, the computer scientist talks about how he makes sense of the experience of being the Unabomber's victim. As a computer wizard with symbolic import as victim, Gelertner says he is "unworthy . . . [in part] because I had written pieces that many colleagues regarded as traitorous" (44). His victimhood doesn't make sense. Still, *he can make his own sense of the event*, which he does by reference to E. B. White's essay "What Do Our Hearts Treasure?"

The bright side, so to speak, of grave injury, discomfort, and nearness to death is that you emerge with a clear fix on what the heart treasures. Mostly I didn't learn anything new but had the satisfaction of having my hunches confirmed. I emerged knowing that, as I had always suspected, the time I spend with my wife and boys is all that matters in the end. I emerged as a practicing Jew. (Admittedly, I had always been one.) (45)

His response to the arrest?

My response to this week's arrest is to congratulate the FBI on its fine work, thank once again the many people who helped us generously when we needed it, remember and honor the men who were bestially murdered and drink *l'chaim*—to the life of mind, to the human enterprise that no bomb can touch. (45)

Ultimately, if reflection is valuable, it's because—as reflection-in-action, as constructive reflection, as reflection-in-presentation, as reflective text—it enables us to *make sense*.

I want to look in some detail at two reflective texts: first, a text on breast cancer and healing written by a pathologist and published in a recent *Harper's*; and second, a student text, the narrative on her grandfather's death that Lara, the student we met in chapter three, wrote. In both of these texts, the authors *enact reflection*: conjoin our inside and outside lives, move to synthesize, reveal gaps, make some sense of the world, show us how it means. If we think reflection is important, we need, I think, to be able to point to texts that work *both* inside and outside of the academy, that suggest and echo and resonate in multiple worlds, that point us in directions we think are worthy.

These texts do all that.

In "A Woman with Breast Cancer: The Will to Live, as Seen Under a Microscope," Spencer Nadler, a surgical pathologist, tells the story of meeting a thirty-five-year-old woman who confronts breast cancer. Into this story, he weaves multiple narratives.

The first and in some ways the least important narrative is the story of the author himself, as pathologist: what a pathologist is, the attitude, the work, the demeanor belonging to pathology. (*We are indeed defined by our work.*) Another way to think about the opening of the text is through the idea of context. Like the reflective writers we've seen before, Nadler opens by providing context:

Preoccupied with cancer cells, I have no social or psychological sense of a cancer patient. I retrieve this woman's biopsy slides from the file and review them in my office. I fix on elements of function, not form: milk-producing lobules, milk-transporting ducts, nipples, fat, connective tissue. I fix on cancer. After her surgery, my responsibility will be to classify the cancer, grade its aggressiveness, and determine the extent of its local spread. I will cull the facts that are pertinent to any use of radiation or chemotherapy, will help the physicians mount their therapeutic blows. (71)

It's a clean business, pathology, much cleaner than I'd imagined, and neater, too, orderly, focused on *biopsy slides*, on *elements of function*, *not form*. I can sense Nadler's satisfaction in making objective the *elements* of breast cancer—what my mother-in-law calls "the dread disease," the one that killed my maternal aunt, the one that has marked my mother, the one I don't particularly want to know myself.

And Nadler understands this, in an appropriately complex way: the value of being *detached*, the role he plays as Everyman, the price that this exacts:

By confining myself to cells, I stay clear of the fiery trials of illness. I remain detached; I render my diagnosis with a cool eye. My fascination with the microscopic form, color, and disposition of cells drives me like a critic to interpret, to applaud or decry for the rest of us. Paradoxically, observing so much of life through a microscope has left me feeling that I've sampled too little, that I've missed the very warp and woof of it. (71)

Observing life through the microscope, Nadler tells us, with an almost Jamesian sensibility, is a life-excluding enterprise.

A second narrative Nadler weaves is that of the patient he calls Hanna, the woman he comes to know at first only routinely: by means of the slides; but then, very conventionally, in person. They meet three times: first, when she wants to see the slides of the cancer; second, when she has other tumors she wants to see; third, when she wants her son, an aspiring doctor, to meet the pathologist.

But as is characteristic in Nadler's world, he first meets the patient Hanna before these personal encounters: he first meets her *by means of the slides*. Hanna's not simply represented by the tumor, though: *she is the tumor*. As tumor, she is mundane, unremarkable, drawing enough attention to be *classified*, then to be put away.

I classify this tumor as an infiltrating, modestly differentiated carcinoma arising from breast ducts.

I have completed my evaluation of Hanna Baylan. I await two more breast biopsies, a lung biopsy, and three skin biopsies. All are suspected of being malignant. Hanna Baylan will fast become a memory, a name of yesterday's surgery schedule with a tumor attached. (71)

Typically, this classification and storage would have *been* the encounter. But Hanna is unusual: she becomes more and other than the tumor when she, suddenly, *appears* at Nadler's door. She wants to take up Nadler's vision: she too wants to see herself as tumor. She requests to see herself as biopsied slide. Surprised, Nadler complies, approaching the task methodically, first showing her healthy tissue:

She listens quietly as I move the pointer across the microscopic landscape. “These clustered islands of glands are lobules,” I tell her. “Milk is produced here in the lactating breast.”

“They look like pink hydrangeas to me,” she says, “a sprawling garden of them.” She talks excitedly, asserting interpretive authority over her own cells. I can only imagine the variety of forms a cellular array such as this might suggest to the uninitiated eye. (71)

From the outset, Hanna understands that she may exert *interpretive authority*, that the cancer has made moot distinctions born of (mere) expertise. Nadler sees things a little differently: Hanna’s description of the healthy cells as *sprawling* life, he sees as merely *uninitiated*. Hanna is there, he seems to think, to be *initiated*. Which she is, soon enough:

She stares into the microscope, transfixed by the disarray of her own malignant growth, a raw view of her life spread out before her. “It looks like distorted Hula Hoops twirling frantically,” she says. “It’s all damaged, isn’t it? Just like my real world.”

“This is your real world, too,” I say.

She looks at me over the top of the microscope. “People don’t shun me because my tumor ducts look like reckless Hula Hoops.” (72)

Here, metaphor translates: the *damaged* cells aren’t flowers, but *frantic Hula Hoops*. Here, real worlds both intersect and collide—the real world of the pathologist, the real world of the person. At the same time, they tell the same story, but it is plural and *differentiated*: a story of *damage* that plays out in the same life-altering yet divergent ways. Multiple real worlds coming together in Hanna, the one explaining and making sense of the other in some incomplete, not altogether coherent way.

Hanna returns later, six years later, numerous protocols of chemotherapy later, four more tumors later, “to see my cancer cells again,” to “confront them one at a time, get a handle on their persistence.” She is, Nadler says, “tired of all the pretty pictures, the metaphors. She’s ready to deal with her cancer in a more direct way. I tell her that our dysfunctional and superfluous cells normally self-destruct in a programmed cellular suicide” (73). But he also has been *initiated*. He begins to use the metaphors that she is moving to give up: “I project one of her biopsy slides onto the screen, magnifying her cancer cells to the size of golf balls. They glare at us like cyclopean

monsters—granular, pink bodies clinging to one another, each nuclear blue eye reflecting its own confusion” (73). Without intending to, Hanna has instructed the pathologist, just as he has instructed her. Multiple worlds, multiple ways of seeing.

Hanna returns for a third, quick visit, her last. She has brought her adolescent son, an aspiring doctor, the “flesh of Hanna’s successful life” (75), to meet the pathologist who has helped her understand the Hanna on the slide. And, we sense, she has come to say goodbye.

She is leaving for Maine, to see the “leaves,” “the fall.”

A third narrative concerns what Hanna teaches Nadler about disease and healing. He knows much about the technical dimensions of disease, needs to learn much about the relationship between and among disease and healing and the human, about the relationship between the person and the disease. He learns not through any course of study, but from Hanna.

One of first things the pathologist learns is the need to personalize one’s disease, to make it one’s own, to give that disease *its own identity*. And Hanna does: through metaphor.

She touches the screen, runs her fingers over the cancer cells as though she were gathering their random spread into some kind of order. The loveliness of cells on slides, all of the different shapes and colors, allows Hanna to give her breast cancer its own identity.

“They’re like moons,” she says, “each with a different face, a different complement of light and dark.”

I turn off the auditorium lights. Her hands spread a silhouette that shadows her moons like eclipses.

“I’d like to spend time here,” she says. “Touch them, get to know them.”

“No rush.” (74)

Another way to understand Nadler’s narrative is to frame it in terms of knowledge and understanding. Knowledge and understanding, we know, aren’t the same, and we see that here quite clearly: the knowledge that Nadler brought to this story; the understanding that he is acquiring, born of relationships and a human being and synthesis and even *disarray*. In fact, I think that’s what Nadler wants us to see: *the knowledge that drew Hanna to him; the understanding that draws him to her.*

And not least important, he begins to understand the power of imagination: “She studies the micrographs, keeps an inquisitive silence. I await the new metaphors she’ll conceive to keep her cancer at bay. Our imagination is what saves us” (74).

As Scott Momaday says, *we are what we imagine*.

A fourth narrative Nadler weaves tells quite specifically about how Hanna transforms him. Hanna initiates a process of intimacy that alters the way the pathologist sees disease and death: their relationship frames both. He starts his reflection on this change by invoking yet another context, that provided by Greek mythology:

Like Charon ferrying between the living and the dead, she glides back and forth between her threatened life and her dead, stained biopsy cells. She quickly grasps the cause and effect—critical cell changes have twisted her life. For years I have processed thousands of such cases, determined the manifold forms of disease. But I’ve never been an intimate part of anyone’s illness, never felt the connection between cells and a larger self. (72)

The *cells* have been isolated, as has Nadler. Hanna as patient and person contextualizes the *cells*, calling the doctor to a new, human interpretation of disease, calling him finally to disengage from disengagement, calling him instead to engage, to become: an intimate part of her illness. Context, it turns out, entails connection, connectedness.

In working with and watching Hanna, Nadler also learns from her about how we learn, more particularly about how we learn through and with language, about how language itself has instructive value, how it can teach us: “There is little need for pedagogy; she is finding her own truths with metaphor” (72). Together, both metaphor and intimacy come together in Nadler’s embrace: “Although I’ve never done this before, I put my arms around her and give her a long, firm hug. Her bones seem as ungraspable as hope” (74).

The fifth and final narrative that Nadler weaves into his story of Hanna responds to the question so characteristic of classroom reflection-in-presentation: more generally, now, *what have you learned?*

Spencer Nadler, pathologist, has learned many and various lessons; his writing suggests that he has learned them well, or perhaps better than well. He has learned them profoundly.

He has learned about Hanna, of course; he thinks of her quite differently now. He can “no longer think of her in terms of the dead, stained cells I see on her slides” (75). Using Hanna as exemplar, Nadler has begun to think about how we represent death, which he talks about through invoking the contexts of print, genre, and obituary:

I have never understood the purpose of a newspaper obituary. As a published notice of death, it certainly works well enough. As a biography filled with concrete facts—achievements, mostly—it gives the life in question a one-sided loftiness devoid of the flaws and failures that make it whole. And where is the mention of the individual’s spirit, effectiveness as a human being, courage in adversity? What about people who successfully battle illness for many years before succumbing? What are their achievements in this regard, or do they simply “die after a long illness”? (74)

The life devoid is not the life, Nadler suggests. In metaphorical terms, pathology is the *obit*, providing the demographic or medical profile, the *concrete facts*, but deleting the stuff of life, *the flaws, the failures, the courage, the spirit*. This deletion is a dear purchase: in representing the one so well, it excludes, almost erases the other: the stuff of life.

Nadler learns also about the role of diagnosis in the healing process; like a teacher learning from a student, the doctor learns about healing from the patient.

I begin to see that the diagnosis of a disease plays little part in the healing process; nor, for that matter, does the treatment strategy. Help attuned to individual needs is what heals. Disease seems to be more than a set of facts, and illness more than a diminished way of life. They are a strange tandem that plays out differently in every host—despair, terror, agony, a call to arms, newfound clarity, transcendence, metamorphosis. Those afflicted must have their needs satisfied on *their* terms. *They* must control, as much as possible, the progress of their own adversity. I can feel Hanna yearn for answers. I must give them to her, show her the pictures that help her. (74-75)

The *progress of adversity*: the paradoxical nature of illness: a moving forward of backwardness. The *control* of these processes, Nadler says, should not lie in *diagnosis* and *treatment* managed by dispassionate doctors, but rather in help provided by compassionate doctors who work with and learn from.

That Nadler has learned—and what he has learned—is also suggested by his final line. He ends as he began, looking through a microscope, but what he sees now is filled with image, with metaphor, with Hanna. “I return to my microscope. In the spread of a squamous skin cancer, I strain to see the deciduous leaves of Maine, so fiery when fallen, then turning slowly to compost, to nurture blanketed seeds” (75).

When we write text, more particularly when we read text, and certainly when we teach text (even in a postmodern age), we search for unity, for themes that resonate throughout, for the structures that bring order and pattern to such themes, for the (appropriate) voices to speak to us. Asking for such order in our students’ texts resonates itself with echoes of middle class values that we inscribe, with our need to tidy up within our students’ texts, to assure that they stay within the boundaries we have demarcated, to make sure that they take care, that they not go too far. It may be that we are only replicating the construct of writing that was inscribed in us—that is, writing as act with intellectual, ideological, and, indeed, moral consequences linked to a unified construct—as Richard Rosenblatt observes:

Students of my generation were taught that E. M. Forster’s *Howard’s End* is an important novel because its central dictum, “Only connect,” is a prescription for moral life. It was assumed that making connections was a sign for the mind’s worth and purpose. Only connect; things fall apart; these fragments I have shored against my ruins. Perhaps this effort to bridge and yoke was a consequence of the big bad Bomb, and of a world growing up under the persistent threat of disintegration. Perhaps it was simply an invention of the academy in which exam questions insisted on one’s making sense of this as related to that. (80)

Fragments and disconnects inhabit our daily lives every bit as much as the connects. Sometimes we can reconnect the disconnects, thread the fragments. Sometimes we can’t. But identifying them is every bit as important as forging connections, sometimes more valuable because unless and until they are acknowledged, we rely on a detached and clean though ultimately false and much less human sense of: *what is*.

Reflection attempts to describe what is. Textually, it includes within its weavings the threads of disconnects as well as of connects,

the threads composing what Louise Phelps calls the tapestry of reflection.

The first assignment in my section of English 1101 is a narrative: I ask that students create and develop a rhetorical situation, complete with purpose, audience, and scenes they will focus on, as a way of helping them frame the task at hand, a way of asking them to do what Polyani says we must, articulate and outline our own good problems. Lara, the commuting 18-year-old student we've met before, decides to write about the death of her grandfather. A Southern church-going non-smoker, he has lung cancer, and he will die before his time.

Although Lara is a fine student (and an interesting young woman), I don't want to make her a different kind of inverted exemplary narrative: I don't want to claim that she is extraordinary. What I do want to claim is that what she made of her experience is quite extraordinary. It is commonplace to ask students to write narratives. It is (all too) commonplace for people we love to die of cancer. What Lara does with the one in the framework of the other is to weave a tapestry of several stories that go by the title "Grandfather's Last Days."

Story One is the portrait of the grandfather as he spends his last days, as seen through Lara's eyes.

Grandfather's once 300 pound frame, miniaturized now to less than 200 pounds. His throat and esophagus, like pieces of raw meat, causes him intense pain when he eats and drinks. He depends wholly on the I.V. to give his body substance to prolong living. Working its way speedily up Grandfather's weakened legs is another complication, gangrene, a painful disease that comes about when the body does not receive enough circulation. I look at his hands, knowing I will not see the soft, strong hands that held my own as a child. Almost the same color of the hospital sheets, they look like a mass of useless bones lying limp at his sides. The only time he moves them is when he grips the sheets as the pain overwhelms his body.

In this portrait, Lara doesn't blink, and she doesn't want us to blink, either. When the body isn't hosting *gangrene*, it looks like a *mass of useless bones lying limp at his sides*. The *IV* is keeping her grandfather

alive, but implied here is the question as to why—or as to what we mean when we say the word alive.

The life described here, embodied in Lara's grandfather, is a painful means of death.

Story Two is the story of medicine's limits, of what it cannot do, plotted against what we expect of it, a story of critical disconnects, of bitter ironies. One scene that tells this tale is within the hospital where Lara's grandfather will die.

I will never grow accustomed to the smell of hospitals. The stench of sickness and death is everywhere—slipping stealthily through the black and white tiled corridors, falling heavily from the fluorescent lights and cutting swiftly through the white cinder block walls. The smell makes me nauseous. I fight the urge to turn and run back to my car. At least there I would be safe from the oppressing sight, smell and feeling of death that cling to my thoughts as I walk toward his room. I reach his room, plaster a smile on my face and enter. I catch my breath as I glimpse Grandfather for the first time in two days. My smile falters, and I recover quickly. I gaze unbelieving at the transformation that has occurred. A man, once full of life, lies motionless on the stark, white sheets of the hospital bed, suffocated in the blankets because he is always cold. The shiny steel bars on the side of the hospital bed usually constricting his movements are down “to allow maximum comfort,” as the nurse says. Maximum comfort? Even minimum comfort seems unlikely in this hellish place.

The *hospital* that was to provide a healing place, at least a caring place, is, Lara says, a *hellish place*, a place where *comfort* is an oxymoron, where the *stench of death* is so powerful that it *cuts through cinder block walls*. And as bad, the treatment intended to save, at least to alleviate, becomes the problem: “And if he opened his eyes, their brilliant blue would be dulled with suffering, and their gaze would be vacant. All this is a result of the chemotherapy that Grandfather had hoped would ease the effects of cancer. My God, how can modern science do this to a body?” *Modern science*, and more particularly modern medicine, does not live up to its promise. Quite the reverse: it has become a monster rivaling the cancerous monster that first drew the grandfather's attention.

The limits of medicine silently mock its assumed purpose.

In the third story, Lara, like Spencer Nadler, and like the writers of classroom reflection-in-presentation, takes up the question, what have I learned? And like these other writers, Lara has learned about what Laura Kaplan calls the outer life and about the inner life, about knowledges and about understandings.

Lara has learned about the disease of cancer, about one form of treatment that does not treat, about what the word “complication” means in this context, about how to explain it in a personal context:

Three months ago my family clung to the hope that chemotherapy would cure the monster growing in Grandfather’s lungs. We knew there were side effects to the treatment, but we were not prepared for the sickness that tore at his body. And now, three months later, I still visit him in the same hospital bed. Now, the cancer is gone, the complication is pneumonia. He has had it twice already, and the doctors say they can do nothing for him.

Lara has also learned about herself, and like Hanna, she has learned about *finding her own truths with metaphor*:

I look around the room, realizing guiltily that I am trying to find something that will take my mind off Grandfather. The bright flowers, the encouraging cards and the sunlight streaming in through the windows do the opposite of their intent—to raise our spirits. My wandering eyes rest on one lone plant. Among all of the other flowers and plants in the room, this plant is dying. Suddenly, I feel an almost insane compassion for this single plant. I feel like bursting into tears, but I know how ridiculous that is. It’s only a plant. I realize I remind me of Grandfather. They are both losing the battle for life. It seems so unfair that this once beautiful plant should now wilt and die while so many around it burst with life.

The *single plant*, the single grandfather, the single writer: all deserving *compassion* that makes Lara feel *insane*. Lara brings together the outer life—the progress of cancer—to her inner life—her reaction to her grandfather’s loss, to her loss, using image and metaphor to understand it, to re-contextualize it, to control it.

Lara learns about funerals, about death, about how it distorts the lives, feelings, faces of those we love; about how we shrink from witnessing such grief:

I sit in the third pew of the church between my mother and my father, trying to hold in the sobs that so desperately want to escape. It has been two days since my mother received the call that her father, my grandfather, was

dead. I have yet to let the tears flow freely. I don't want to cry; I don't want people to know I'm weak. I look at the casket with the American flag draped across it. Is he really in there? I don't like looking at the casket, so I look around at the people. They fill every pew in the church, and some are standing. Expressions of pain and sorrow distort so many familiar faces. I don't like looking at them either. The only safe place to look is at my feet, so I stare at them intently.

And finally, Lara has learned how to make a tentative connection, a tenuous resolution: "I am no longer angry at myself, the doctors or God."

Chris Anson, in summarizing the qualities of reflective writers, says:

In contrast to relativists, then, reflective writers eventually find stability and resolution in the chaos of diversity, by analyzing alternatives in the content and structure of their writing. These conclusions must remain to some degree tentative, since the acknowledged relativism of the world allows for modification. But even in grappling with the most difficult moral and intellectual questions, reflective writers assume that some perspectives are more logical, sensible, and well-supported than others. This is writing we are familiar with as professionals—balanced, informed, reasoned. (338)

Lara is such a reflective writer. As we saw earlier (chapter three), she writes reflection: what I've called reflection-in-action, constructive reflection, reflection-in-presentation. In those processes, she has learned not only how to talk about writing in a reflective way, but also how to write reflective texts. Reflection in the writing; reflection apart from the writing.

Bothand.

As I've presented it here, reflection seems devoid of action, and I want to correct that impression. In the summer of 1994, Nancy DeJoy first suggested to me that she saw a real linkage between reflection and action, an idea echoed by one of the reviewers of a draft of this text:

I wanted the author to acknowledge the ways in which other texts might be obviously "reflective." I was thinking, for instance, of Jim Berlin's posthumously published book, *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, in which Berlin

shares some of his career-long reflections on his field and his own teaching. Such a book isn't reflective perhaps in the way the two texts in the chapter are, but isn't Berlin's text the result of similar kinds of reflection?

Of course. (And: *thank you.*) In the conclusion to that text, Berlin reflects upon a critique of his own work offered by a listener: "My error, he explained, was that I grossly overestimated the influence of the English department in the lives of our students and the workings of our society. English teachers, he insisted, are in the larger scheme of things just not all that important" (177). Berlin then goes on to explain that while we English teachers may be less important than he believed when he was younger, we still contribute mightily—and not always well—to the identity formation of students. Because we do, he says, we must "take seriously our duty as public intellectuals inside and outside the classroom" (180). Clearly, that work included this book as well as Berlin's others, the pedagogical work that accompanied them, and the activism that marked his life.

And, I think, if we look around at the work conducted by *many* of our colleagues, we will find likewise. I think here of Wendy Bishop's *Teaching Lives* and her reflection on her own pedagogical practices and poetics of knowing; of Victor Villanueva's reflections on language and identity and schooling and the personal in *Bootstraps*; of Jonathan Kozol's many volumes where his voice infuses the object of critique; of bell hooks's work on what it means to be black and female in America. Although differently, all of these projects, like Berlin's, are reflectively activist. Reflection does not always produce activism—unless (and this, in my view, is unless writ large) we see understanding itself as a form of activism. But reflection is not at odds with a conventional view of activism: often it motivates such engagement.

Reflection connects to many kinds of work.

In this text, I've tried to do the same thing: talk about reflection, be reflective, be aware of how such reflection can change classroom practice—by bringing identity formation into the center of class, by assuming agency on the part of students, by seeing learning and texts as negotiated. I've focused on reflection that takes place on multiple occasions for multiple purposes in multiple forms: a reflection that occurs during writing and after, between and among drafts; that occurs cumulatively over time; that we shape for presentational

purposes. Although this reflection assists in the writing (process) of a particular text, it also makes possible a more general, generative understanding of writing. Put differently, working within a single rhetorical situation provides the stuff that writers talk about, and *through that talk we become*. Over time, then, reflection provides the ground where the writer invents, repeatedly and recursively, a composing self. Concurrently, reflection contributes to the writing of texts that themselves are marked by a reflective tenor—multi-contextual, thoughtful, holistic.

My interest in reflection did not spring from an interest in theory. It developed in the ground of practice: as I watched students work, as I began to appreciate how little I knew without asking, to learn from my students when I did ask, to understand ever-so-gradually that the teaching of writing, like the writing of text, is a social process, an interaction, an exchange, and finally, that to learn from these experiences what they had to teach, I needed to structure them, to find several means of framing and ways of aligning them.

To provide the primary frame, I've taken the concepts of reflection-in-action and reflective transfer—the basic premises of Donald Schon's "reflective practice"—and re-theorized them specifically for work in the writing classroom, although they apply, I think, in any space where literacy and text and curriculum are topics of inquiry. At the heart of this practice-based theory are three concepts:

reflection-in-action, the process of reviewing and projecting and revising, which takes place within a composing event;

constructive reflection, the process of developing a cumulative, multi-selved, multi-voiced identity, which takes place between and among composing events; and

reflection-in-presentation, the process of articulating the relationships between and among the multiple variables of writing and the writer in a specific context for a specific audience.

I've talked here about those concepts in a progressive and yet recursive way—about the reflection-in-action that addresses a single text; about the constructive reflection that works cumulatively toward identity formation; about reflection-in-presentation, with its inward-outwardness; about reflective reading and responding, and how to learn to do both; about writing, identity, and reflection, and

about learning, overlearning, and couterlearning, and about curriculum-for-students; about reflection and its complexities in assessment situations; about using reflection to understand literacy; about reflective texts and reflective human beings and making sense. Though I'm not quite out of breath, *it's a lot*, I know—a new way of seeing the classroom and the students in it, a new way of working with them, a new way of understanding our work. But *it offers a lot*. More than I think we—or I—understand. Coming in part from portfolios, reflection is not unlike portfolios in its potential: it too has the power to change the face of American education.

In developing this theory, I've made certain arguments. Like reflection itself, they are threads weaving whole cloth. I've argued

that reflection is a discipline, a habit of mind/spirit/feeling that informs what we do, always tacitly, sometimes explicitly, and that making such understanding explicit is a good

that regardless of how much our context shapes us, we have agency, and it is in the doubling of that agency, in what Patricia Carini calls “agency and the witnessing of agency,” that we learn

that for reflection to be generative and constructive in a school setting, it must be practiced, must itself be woven not so much throughout the curricula as *into* it

that reflection is both individual and social; as such, reflection is always rhetorical

that through reflection, students learn to know their work, to like it, to critique it, to revise it, to start anew

that through reflection, students reveal a “native language” which we are only now beginning to study, a language that can tell us much about how they and we learn, about the multiple contexts through which and in which we learn

that through reflection we teach ourselves through metaphor, and that metaphor is the primary mode of students' native languages

that students should reflect on writings they care about, that they must be allowed to exercise some authority over their material (which is, after all, the product of their minds), that they have

something to share with us, and not just in marginalized or unofficial places but in the assignments that “count,” both in our terms and theirs

that through reflection, students invent identities, and that in general that identity-formation is the always unfolding purpose of the writing classroom and of the classroom where our prospective colleagues learn to teach and to tutor

that classroom reflection-in-presentation is characterized by certain features that we also find in reflective discourse: invocation of multiple contexts, for instance, and synthesis and use of metaphor

that through reflection, we understand curriculum pluralized: as lived, as delivered, as experienced: it is in the intersection of these curricula that identities are formed; students exert the most authority in that intersection since they are the ones who inhabit that place; learning more about that place is a prime goal of reflection used for educational purposes

that through our own reflections, we make knowledge and compose understandings: students about their work, teachers about theirs

that through the concepts of counter-learner and over-learner—separately *and* together—we can begin to explore in yet another way how and why it is that students resist learning to write

that reflection balances a tension between the impulse for coherence and a sense of discontinuity; it brings together the inner life and the outer life; it provides a place where such coherence and fragments and fissures can co-exist

that like rhetoric itself, *reflection is both practice and art*

This is not to say that we shouldn't mark possible dangers that reflection brings with it. Some will find the term reflection too slippery. Some will claim that reflection turns students inward at the expense of the social and at the neglect of the ideological. Some will claim that it inappropriately awards authority to the student. Some will argue that the only value of having students undertake reflection is to produce “better” primary texts. Some will assert that all we really

need is the reflection-in-presentation, that there isn't time to cover to all the material that has to be covered and do all this as well. Or: that in order to do what is illustrated and theorized here, school will change. *Yes.*

I want to say that all of these concerns are valid. But even taken together, they do not refute what students and teachers have been doing now—reflectively—for some time. All I've tried to do is to organize and illustrate and theorize what we've been doing so as to offer a coherent, voiced, imaginable world, one where the *de facto* curricula come into contact with the school curricula: where students are the agents of their own learning, where they know and describe and like and critique and revise their own writing, their own learning, where we learn from and with them.

If it's imaginable, it's doable.

A second set of cautions obtains for those who do practice reflection and who use it in their practice. Robert Brookfield summarizes those cogently: "Working solely within the reflective practice tradition can cause us to lose a certain critical 'edge.' If we're not careful, our enthusiasm for reflection can be converted exclusively into a concern for technique. The temptation will then be to measure how much reflection we have performed on any given day or how we score on a scale of reflective competence" (216). And "Although it's important to know what reflection looks like, we must be wary of specifying universally applicable criteria that can be converted into standardized competencies" (216). And finally, "Reflection in and of itself is not enough; it must always be linked to how the world can be changed. We reflect on our teaching so that we can create the conditions under which both teachers and students become aware of their own power of agency" (217).

There are also many complex questions about reflection that we need to ask, to reflect upon. Some of them include:

is reflection a universal? does it vary along class lines, in different cultures, according to gender?

what kinds of questions should we be asking? when? should they always be sequenced? what sequences will work in which contexts? what response should we provide to those sequences?

how hospitable a medium is a computer network for reflection? are there certain conventions that will foster reflection? what is the effect of a public audience on reflection?

what would students tell us about reflection within disciplinary contexts? are the operations similar? different? how can they theorize about this? how can teachers theorize about the teaching in these contexts?

what would students tell us after the fact—2 months, 2 years, 20 years—about their reflective habits? what proved to be most useful and why? how are we defining useful? which habits of mind could they transfer into the world?

what other characteristics might we ascribe to reflective texts and to classroom reflection-in-presentation?

could we develop a corpus of reflective texts? how useful might they be in the classroom?

what would teachers tell us about how their teaching changes once they use reflection? or: does it change?

In many ways, this is my story, of course, or my stories. Like all the reflective writers we've seen, I am telling you (in the long version, I guess) what I've learned. Like Lara, I have named one topic only to show you much more about many others. One of them concerns the impact of this learning on me: it's not only what I learned, but as Brookfield implies, what the impact of the learning is. I think the evidence of that impact is woven throughout this text. My students have changed me at least as much as I have changed them, sometimes with some resistance on both sides, I acknowledge. Resistance and reflection are symbiotic (but that's a text for another day).

Teaching is a living thing; it changes.

In this text, I've also tried to model reflection both in process and in product. I've understood myself primarily in three roles here: first, always as teacher; later, more tentatively as researcher, studying my

students not empirically, but observationally, descriptively, reflectively; later still, as writer. *Writing is so public*, as text, my story becomes in content and manner in ways I don't always apprehend, don't inevitably control, can't reliably predict. *Teaching is often still private*; I touch more lives directly, but I can keep those stories out of your line of vision. *Research carries more weight*, makes it more official, takes me back to the public sphere. Here, I've made the choice to bring the teacher, the researcher, and the writer into dialogue within the public view, to animate one inside of the others, each in terms of the others. In sum, I've tried to read my students, my classes, my teaching—and our texts—individually, collectively, together, in multiple contexts, so as to learn, to articulate, for both you and me: reflectively.

Through such reflecting, within the multiplicity of these contexts, I create my truths, for today.