OPINION: Teaching Bartleby to Write: Passive Resistance and Technology’s Place in the Composition Classroom

Gregory Palmerino

“Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance.”
—Herman Melville, “Bartleby the Scrivener” (par. 3)

Ever since he was first introduced to me during my undergraduate years as a bumbling English major, the specter of one of literature’s most enigmatic and forlorn characters—in whom Herman Melville brilliantly depicts the idea that the line between doing and not doing, succeeding and failing, sanity and madness is entirely precarious and utterly razor-thin—has haunted my fragile, yet imaginative, psyche. Nowadays, as a bumbling but earnest English teacher, I am more concerned with Melville’s unnamed narrator than I am with his title character. The reason? I have come to recognize an unnerving trend in my composition classroom: the explicit refusal on the part of a growing number of students to do any writing.

I am well aware that this may not be news for many composition teachers, past or present. I imagine apathy is as old as education itself. As Tom March puts it, “Who hasn’t heard that wrenching response so common among young people, the verbal shrug of complete apathy: ‘Whatever’” (16). Even as I write these words, I get the feeling that I am saying nothing and everything all at once. But a recent experience with one particular student has awakened a realization that I had previously overlooked or refused for some reason to fully acknowledge, in the same way that Melville’s unnamed narrator is eventually awakened to his humanity by Bartleby.

Gregory Palmerino is a writing specialist and first-year writing instructor at Mitchell College in New London, Connecticut. He also teaches composition as a part-time instructor at Manchester Community College, where he met the student described in this essay.

College English, Volume 73, Number 3, January 2011

Copyright © 2011 by the National Council of Teachers of English. All rights reserved.
graphs—to every kind of literature or documentation which might conceivably hold any political or ideological significance. (11)

I hope that readers will recognize the latter as an excerpt from George Orwell's prophetic work 1984 in which he describes Winston Smith's job at the Ministry of Truth. In pointing out the comparison, I want to make clear what is at stake: as we rethink the composing process, are we focusing the discussion on anything other than the human subject? To couch our arguments in anything else—job training, employment, industry, technical skills—not only misses the mark, in my opinion, but directly undermines composition's highest aspirations: “to produce independent minds, which in self-awareness and self-criticism think and judge on their own” (Engell 174).

Students like the ones Yancey cites are rightly grasping at a lifeline of authentic, concrete human communication, one that reinforces human values rather than undermines it. Unfortunately, they are not conscious of this desire because technology—their all-encompassing and ubiquitous means of expression—is at once their lifeline and their anchor. It is the job of the composition teacher to make them conscious of the fact that their heads may actually be under water. What is needed in the composition classroom is not a search for more ways to incorporate technology. What is needed is more human relevance.

It seems like an obvious point, but the desire for relevant human experience through language has to consciously and vigorously contain technology. Otherwise, our composition classrooms will come to look more and more like what Mark Edmundson has satirically described in his essay, “A Word to the New Humanities Professor.” I quote the entire passage to allow the author’s sardonic wit and prescient comment to shine through.

As everyone now realizes, the computer is the most significant invention in the history of humankind. Students who do not master its intricacies are destined for a life of shame, poverty, and neglect. Every course you teach should thus be computer-oriented. Computers are excellent research tools, accordingly your students should do a lot of research. If you are studying a poem by Blake like “The Chimney Sweeper,” which depicts the debasement and exploitation of young boys whose lot, it’s been said, is not altogether unlike the lot of many children now living in American inner cities, you should charge your students with using the computer to compile as much interesting information about the poem as they can. They can find articles about chimney sweepers from 1790s newspapers; contemporary pictures and engravings that depict these unfortunate little creatures; critical articles that interpret the poem in a seemingly endless variety of different, equally valid and interesting ways; biographical information about Blake, with hints about events in his own boyhood that would have made chimney sweepers a special interest; portraits of the author at various stages of his life; maps of Blake’s London. Together the class can create a Blake-Chimney Sweeper website: www.blakesweeper.edu. (31)
When the multimodal uses of technology find themselves in the driver's seat, such activities will become commonplace in the composition classroom. And the illusion of creating original texts, for original audiences, will become just another futile exercise similar to what contemporary media is now peddling as info-snacking: information that satisfies individual schedules and appetites ("News War"). The term itself should reveal just how much sustenance can be obtained from ingesting information—even profound information—in this hyper-subjective and disembodied way. Nicholas Carr, for instance, makes an interesting case in his book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* for the dramatic and sustained ebb the human mind may be experiencing. Writing for the *Wall Street Journal* online, he states, "[A] growing body of scientific evidence suggests that the Net, with its constant distractions and interruptions, is also turning us into scattered and superficial thinkers" (par. 1). Much of the general public, however, interprets technological "advances" as democratizing without understanding the power of presence.

Is there any difference between Edmundson's fictional account and the work of a nineteenth-century scrivener? Some readers may argue that the budding Blakeans have built important and indispensable skills in teamwork, in research, in organization, and, of course, in technical know-how—skills highly valued in the job market, which is what industry, including academia, says we are supposed to be preparing students for as educators. As Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia Selfe explain, "In an increasingly technological world, students need to be experienced and skilled not only in reading (consuming) texts employing multiple modalities, but also in composing in multiple modalities, if they hope to communicate successfully within the digital communication networks that characterize workplaces, schools, civic life, and span traditional cultural, national, and geopolitical borders" (3; emphasis added). A scrivener, on the other hand, merely copies what someone else wrote. True enough. But what employer in our corporation-saturated world craves employees who are capable of and encouraged to scrutinize and challenge information from "within"? If the current corporate ethos says, "Workers of the world, give us what we want!" then where will students learn how to challenge when they are taught only how to communicate within?

Peter Coy, economics editor at *BusinessWeek* magazine, commented on journalism's role in the global financial meltdown in an interview on the PBS News Hour: "[T]he one thing I would plead guilty to is [ . . . ] a failure of imagination. If you went back and read [BusinessWeek's] stories, the stories we wrote, if we had drawn the logical implications of what we ourselves had written, we probably would have been more bearish" ("Debate" par. 51). First, I would be remiss if I did not mention that Melville's story is also "A Story of Wall Street," but I leave it to others to take Bartleby into the myriad directions his tale is always ready to go, as is most great literature (see Carol Jago's report, *Crash! The Currency Crisis in American Culture*).