Ballast Quarterly Review, v17n2, Winter 2001-2002

Roy R. Behrens
University of Northern Iowa, roy.behrens@uni.edu

Copyright ©2002 Roy R. Behrens
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/ballast

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Recommended Citation

This Periodical is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ballast Quarterly Review by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.
A RAT IN THE HOUSE
MIGHT EAT THE ICE CREAM
WALLACE STEVENS
The only emperor is the emperor of ice cream.

OSBERT SITWELL
Freud Madox Fraud.

ALAN COREN
Apart from cheese and tulips, the main product of Holland is advocaat, a drink made from lawyers.

JOHN NAUGHTON
Don't get me wrong. I have nothing against businessmen. They are a necessary life form, like earthworms and dung beetles and the E. coli bacteria which inhabit the human gut. Without them we would have no shopping malls, junk mail, leisure complexes, direct insurance sales lines, dial-a-pizza services or countless other benefits of modern civilization.

MURIEL SPARK
To me education is a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul. To Miss Mackay it is a putting in of something that is not there, and that is not what I call education, I call it intrusion.
THIRTY YEARS AGO, as a graduate student at the Rhode Island School of Design, I was stumped by a series of questions about an esoteric research problem. Someone said to ask for help from a certain teacher whom I had never met, because this person was rumored to be one of the smartest people on campus.

Unfortunately, when I found this designer and explained what I was working on, he refused to cooperate. Instead, he looked at me pointblank and said that solving my problems was not his responsibility: “I’m not here to give you the answers,” he replied, “I am here to annoy you with questions.”

He was partly right. I was undoubtedly annoyed, and I walked away in disbelief. But I did not abandon those questions, and, in the years since, I’ve never stopped looking for answers. At the same time, nor have I ever forgotten that single, brief encounter (I never saw this person again, and he later

JEAN PIAGET
Each time one prematurely teaches a child something he could have discovered for himself, that child is kept from inventing it and consequently from understanding it completely.

JOHN W. GARDNER
The ultimate goal of the educational system is to shift to the individual the burden of pursuing his education.
E. M. FORSTER
Spoon feeding in the long run teaches us nothing but the shape of the spoon.

JAMES WATSON
My chief piece of advice to a young person is go to a place where people are bright. That is, avoid dumb people—those people who can’t give anything to you—and turn to people who are brighter than yourself.

JAMES HEARST
How the devil do I know if there are rocks in your field. Plow it and find out.

died prematurely), partly because the experience was so frustrating, but also because I have come to believe, as I think he did, that one of the secrets of teaching (whether graphic design or any other subject) is to know when to step back and to act through inactivity—to function less as an authority than as a catalyst.

To provoke action from someone through omission or implicitness is often referred to as closure. Presented with unfinished or incomplete patterns, we tend to respond automatically by fretting about it, while filling in the gaps ourselves. In psychology, this phenomenon was investigated in 1927 by Bluma Zeigarnik, a graduate student of the Gestalt psychologists at the Berlin Psychological Institute. In her pioneering experiment, 164 subjects were asked to take on various manual tasks, with instructions that these be completed both accurately and quickly. In half the instances, she interrupted them, leaving their work unfinished, while, in the other half, they were allowed to go on unimpeded. Afterwards, by interviewing the subjects, she concluded that, by an overwhelming margin, unresolved experiences were remembered far more vividly than completed ones.

This tactic of triggering closure through incompleteness, known now as “Zeigarnik’s effect,” is commonly used in advertising, to ensure that television audiences, for example, will recall a certain product long after they’ve seen a commercial. And of course this is also one reason why I can still clearly remember my encounter with that uncooperative teacher.

All this is old hat to designers. After all, the ubiquitous motto of modern
design is “Less is more,” or, as Abram Games once said, as a graphic designer “you wind the spring, and it is released in the mind of the viewer.” But it is no less essential in teaching to provoke by playful teasing, and to leave out nonessentials. The ensuing scholastic fandango, which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls flow (in a book with the same title) or “optimal experience,” results from the constant adjustment between the incompleteness of a teacher’s prompting and the capacity of a student to complete it.

Csikszentmihalyi provides an example in a wonderful story about his dog Hussar, who loved to run circles around him during their walks together, while daring his master to catch him. “Occasionally I would take a lunge,” writes Csikszentmihalyi, “and if I was lucky I got to touch him. Now the interesting part is that whenever I was tired, Hussar would run much tighter circles, making it relatively easy for me to catch him; on the other hand, if I was in good shape and willing to extend myself, he would enlarge the diameter of his circle. In this way, the difficulty of the game was kept constant.”

According to David Lodge (in Small World), such gamelike adjustments can also be found in activities as unrelated as watching a striptease and reading: “The dancer teases the audience, as the text teases its readers,” he writes, “with the promise of an ultimate revelation that is infinitely postponed. Veil after veil, garment after garment, is removed, but it is the delay [my italics]
in the stripping that makes it exciting, not the stripping itself; because no sooner has one secret been revealed than we lose interest in it and crave another...To read is to surrender oneself to an endless displacement of curiosity and desire from one sentence to another, from one action to another, from one level of the text to another. The text unveils itself before us, but never allows itself to be possessed; and instead of striving to possess it, we should take pleasure in its teasing."

As a teacher, I think I've always been aware of the importance of being implicit, and yet it has never been easy to do. At moments when I am unsure of my abilities as a teacher, I respond instinctively by overcompensating. Knowing that I am responsible for the outcome of my students' work, I lecture too incessantly, intrude when I shouldn't, and use classroom problems that are far too rigid. In part, I may still be rebounding from my experience with the opposite tendency, which prevailed in the sixties, in which, as a student, I was free to indulge in the ambience of "doing my own thing." But it also grows out of the passion with which I want to instill in my students the "truths" I have slowly, painstakingly learned about perception, aesthetics, typography, color, page layout, Illustration, problem-solving, and the history of design.

Today, after so many years in the classroom, I still struggle daily to try to become less domineering, to evolve toward a posture of teaching that drifts between the poles of control and acquiescence, between structure and lack of direction. Looking back on my life as a teacher, I am reminded of the porridge tasting in "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" (too hot, too cold, just right), as I seem to have tried on a similar set of teaching philosophies (too loose, too tight, just right).
I am also reminded of a brilliant passage in a book by British psychologist Liam Hudson, titled *The Cult of the Fact*: “The teacher who leaves his students’ minds open, in a state of promiscuous athleticism, is scarcely a teacher at all. His proper function, in other words, must be an ambiguous one: he must transmit an intellectual tradition with gusto, and instill loyalty to it, but leave open the possibility of gradual or even revolutionary change. And what matters in practice is not so much the teacher’s motive, nor even his style, as the elbow room he allows.”

If you truly leave elbow room, you do not end up with obedient pups. One of the things that most pleases him (and me), said Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, author, and teacher (when interviewed by Joan Evelyn Ames in *Mastery*), “is a student who doesn’t imitate me, a student who takes what’s good for her or him and runs with it. I like independent students who can stand on their own feet and not get hung up on me. It’s the same quality I like in cats: a certain standoffishness, having their own mind, taking what they want and leaving the rest behind. You can’t train a cat the way you can train a dog. So I like cat-type students rather than dog-type students.”

More than a dozen years ago, I was browsing through a book when I ran across the following unattributed maxim: “The secret of teaching is to appear to have known all your life things I always forget. Names, faces, and—the third I can’t remember.”

---

**ITALO SVEVO**
There are three things I always forget. Names, faces, and—the third I can’t remember.

---

**REVEREND WILLIAM SPOONER**
Was it you or your brother who was killed in the war?

---

**W. C. FIELDS**
It was a woman who drove me to drink—and, you know, I never thanked her.
what you learned this afternoon." I stopped and read this over again. And again. This is not a prescription for teaching, I thought, it's a blueprint for seizing and keeping control. In contrast, the aim of a teacher should be the transfer of power, from teacher to student, and the persuasion of each student to accept responsibility for his or her life-long education—a goal that is often reliably reached by various forms of deliberate provocation, among them intentionally leaving things out.

When I got back to Bradford [England, after visiting the austere Modernist apartment of typographer Jan Tschichold] from Basel, I found that the room I rented from Mrs. Buchsieb contained too many ornaments. I began counting them, and found that the room itself contained one hundred and thirty-six separate objets d'art and eighty-nine pictures, prints, calendars, plates, mirrors, and texts on the walls. I decided I could stand it no longer. I placed all the vases in queue on the piano beside the door as a sign for their removal, and put a lot of other stuff out of sight, leaving the mantel shelf quite bare. I stood back to admire the effect, thought enviously of Tschichold's room in Basel, left a box of my own matches looking rather like a night-watchman's hut on a slum clearance site, and went out to post a letter and have a drink.

When I returned, the room was exactly as it had been before my ministrations, except that Mrs. Buchsieb was standing in the middle of it looking like a dive-bomber about to strike.

RUARD MCLEAN True to Type (New Castle DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2000).

Derrida's Elsewhere, directed by Safaa Fathy. VHS video. 68 minutes. Color. 1999. 68 Minutes. Available from First Run / Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn NY 11201. Website: http://www.frif.com. Devotees of Jacques Derrida (1930-), the chief proponent of Deconstructivism, will undoubtedly find this enthralling, as did critics at two film festivals, where it was honored with several awards. At the same time, it may not be quite as delightful for those who have suffered by whacking a trail through translations of Derrida, not to mention those murky discussions of him in PhD dissertations. Thank goodness, this film is Derrida Lite, in the sense that it largely consists of a more or less leisurely saunter with the aging French philosopher (now 72), in which we see him in his car (playing his cassette tapes), strolling the streets of his native Algiers, relaxing on the beach, standing in front of an aquarium (comparing his school and himself to the fish), lecturing to entranced French university students, touring the burial sites of his cats, and having his photograph taken. All the while, even as the nemesis of metaphysics, he keeps up an unbroken banter in which the most trivial physical things are described as more lofty, as metaphysical. Among the most interesting episodes are the tour of the disordered library in his attic, which he calls his "sublime hideout" (he also has an outdoor shed, which is even more musty and messy), and a scene in which he sits in front of El Greco's famous painting of the Burial of Count Orgaz and recalls the details of his mother's demise.

HENRY MOORE [recalling when Picasso showed him Guernica in 1937] [It] was a long way from being finished...Anyway, you know that woman who comes running out of the little cabin on the right with one hand held in front of her? Well, Picasso told us that there was something missing there, and he went and fetched a roll of paper and stuck it in the woman's hand, as much as to say that she'd been caught in the bathroom when the bombs came. That was just like him, of course—to be tremendously moved about Spain and yet turn it aside with a joke.

BILLY WILDER You have Van Gogh's ear for music.
MAX WALL

Wall is the name—Max Wall. My father was the Great Wall of China. He was a brick.

WINSTON BURDETT

I don’t want to be quoted—and don’t quote me that I don’t want to be quoted.

JAMES BOSWELL

A page of my journal is like a cake of portable soup. A little may be diffused into a considerable portion.

HENRY MOORE

The game “shut-eye golf” was introduced and I think invented by Eric Ravilious. On this large sheet of paper you drew an imaginary golf course with a variety of obstacles—e.g. a dog, a tree, a cow, a bandstand, a duck pond and so on—and then you’d put a few extra bunkers in; it was a golf course in plan. Then you put the point of your pencil in hole 1, had a good look at the course and where hole 2 was, and what obstacles lay between, then you had to close your eyes and attempt to draw a line to hole 2, without the line touching any drawn obstacle. Sometimes one did it in one, but more often at one’s first shot one’s line touched a tree, or a bunker, or ended up far away from the hole—one had to play a second, a third and so on until the pencil point rested plumb in the hole. You could play a nine-hole course, or eighteen holes, and as in real golf the least score was the winner.

SYDNEY HOOK

A teacher is a sculptor in the snow.
HENRY MOORE [in a letter to Arthur Sale in 1939]
...when the time comes that I'm asked, or have got to do something in this war, I hope it will be something less destructive than taking part in the actual fighting & killing. There ought to be ways of being used even as a sculptor,—in making of splints etc, or jobs connected with plastic surgery,—though the most likely thing I suppose is camouflage work.

CHARLEY WATERMAN [in Gun Dogs & Bird Guns] A man can sit in his living room and tell you he smells nothing at all; at least he is conscious of no odors. Give him a whiff of frying ham, and he thinks he smells that and nothing else. So if his nose is selective, it is crudely so, and he records nothing but the exceptional odors. But visually he is highly selective, and he'll find a small object of interest in a vast scene containing a thousand larger things. The dog's nose is as selective as the man's eyes.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU
I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment while I was hoeing in a village garden, and I felt that I was more distinguished by that circumstance than I should have been by an epaulet I could have worn.

TALLULAH BANKHEAD
[to a Salvation Army bell ringer, after placing money in his tambourine]
Don't bother to thank me. I know what a perfectly ghastly season it's been for you Spanish dancers.

J. FULTON SHEEN
The big print giveth and the fine print taketh away.
RIGHT
Pen and ink drawing
by JARED ROGNESS,
originally published in
the North American
Review Vol 286 Nos 3-
4 (May-August 2001),
as an illustration for
"Suicide" by Elaine
Ford.

Optimum, directed by Henry Colomer. VHS video. BxW. 2000. 55 minutes. Available from First Run / Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn NY 11201. Website: http://www.frif.com. Apparently still on display in a cabinet at University College in London are the mummified remains of British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), who willed that his corpse be dissected in the presence of his friends, and a permanent effigy made of his bones. Bentham is best known as the leading proponent of Utilitarianism, the belief that society ought to ensure "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." An unparalleled eccentric, he tried to arrive at a system by which human pain and pleasure could be precisely weighed, to which he assigned the term "felicific calculus." This film, which is to large extent bizarre, is both an informative and entertaining overview of Bentham's proposals as compared to the equally curious work of two later Victorians, Charles Babbage (1792-1871) and Francis Galton (1822-1911). Its title comes from the belief of all three that "all human resources should be optimized and made profitable." Babbage, who was obsessed with classification and mathematics, invented a forerunner of the computer called the "calculating engine" (from which comes the current use of that word, as in "search engine"). Galton, the cousin of Charles Darwin, made important contributions to the scientific measurement of inherited physical and mental attributes, in the interests of using "eugenics" to shape the biological inheritance of humans. As the film makes clear, with a dry and perpetual humor, all three of these men were examples of genius-gone-batty. Just how offbeat their research was is explained in meticulous detail with vintage photographs, drawings, diagrams, and delightful animations.

JOHN DONNE
No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.
Years ago, I was approached by a law firm to testify as an expert witness. They showed me a drawing and asked if I knew, simply by looking at it, if it had been traced or drawn unaided. I responded without hesitation because I believed I could easily tell. I recalled that incident as I read this book, since much of David Hockney’s “evidence” for its hypothesis rests on his claim to be able to tell a drawing made freehand (by the process he calls “eyeballing” or “groping”) from one that was traced using optical aids. Hockney (b.1937) is a British-born painter who became famous in the 1960s as a Pop Artist. He has since moved on to other work (notably, using Polaroid photography), has settled in California, and is among the most interesting artists today. He not only creates art, but also studies it in ways that one might expect of a scholar. In this large-sized, exuberant opus, filled with breathtaking, full-color details, he argues that he, as an artist, has noticed that something is woefully wrong in the standard account of the progress of art since the 1400s. It is widely assumed, for example, that European Old Masters, beginning with the Early Renaissance, made drawings and paintings of models from life, freehand and unaided; so that whatever effects they obtained were achieved by their use of perspective, from their studies of anatomy, and from a new-found attention to worldly forms. But, as Hockney demonstrates, Renaissance “photorealism” emerged with amazing rapidity from Gothic innocence, which prompts him to posit an alternate cause: he thinks that artists used optical aids (simple concave mirrors at first, then lenses and cameras obscura) as early as the 15th century (“the big change occurred sometime around 1420-30”). Not all, but the bulk of his evidence comes from merely looking carefully at reproductions of paintings by Van Eyck, Holbein, Carravaggio, Velasquez, Vermeer, Ingres, and dozens of others. Substantial skill is required to trace with an optical instrument (even today, which Hockney confirms by attempting to draw, not very successfully, using a convex mirror and a camera lucida), so that he repeatedly cautions (contrary to what is now commonly thought) that tracing in art is not cheating, and his discovery in no way belittles the work of the Old Masters (but of course that’s exactly where all of this leads). Further, he does not claim that “all artists used optics,” only that in a surprisingly short time period “the lens had become so dominant that its image was now the model for all [European] painting.” Assuming that Hockney’s conjecture is true, a number of irksome anomalies in Old Master paintings become explainable, such as the smallness but accuracy of certain of their preparatory drawings; the precision with which they could render the surfaces of globes, lutes, and melons (“the lute of the fruit world”); the abundance of lefthanded artist’s models (righthanders, Hockney surmises, reversed by the lens of the drawing machine); and the coexistence of offset, mismatched points of view, as if key elements in the picture had been drawn separately with an optical instrument, then montaged together to form a tableau. It may even explain the dramatic juxtaposition of highlight and shadow in the paintings of Caravaggio, Velasquez, Rembrandt, Georges de la Tour, and others. I should explain that for many years, long before this book began, there was little doubt among art historians that some artists had experimented with drawing devices (Vermeer, for example, is said to have used a camera obscura); we know that there are pictures of these by Leonardo, Durer, and others, even Van Gogh. So the real contribution of Hockney (whose unsung collaborator on this project was a physics professor named Charles Falco) may be largely a matter of quantity, in the sense that he may have discovered that these kinds of devices were used earlier and to a greater and wider degree than anyone would have guessed. If this book is picked up and adopted as fact (which is very likely, given Hockney’s skills as a publicist), it may mean the end of the spurious myth that artists must always draw unassisted, or freehand. Unfortunately, it is also likely to convince lay audiences of the equally wrongful assumption that there is no such thing as freehand drawing, and that artists are incapable of drawing “realistically” except by resorting to optical aids.

Most anthologists of poetry or quotations are like those who eat cherries or oysters, first picking the best and winding up by eating everything.

There are scores of books of quotations, but surprisingly few are of lasting value, in part because most of their entries are hackneyed, simplistic, poorly stated, or pointless. To the credit of this modest book of quotations about art and artists, a fair portion of them are not only unfamiliar, but tend to be somewhat more thoughtful than those in comparable volumes. More than 1000 entries are organized under 57 headings, including such standard categories as Abstraction, Color, Creativity, and Photography, and others—less standard until recently—like Death and Dying, Gender and Race, History and Time, and Suffering and Pain. Regrettably, while the artists' and author's names are given, the sources are not listed for even a single quote. This is unfortunate because quotations are necessarily taken out of context, and, in many cases, they have also been translated freely, paraphrased, rewritten, or misquoted. Without some indication of the time and circumstances of an isolated statement, it may not be wise to expect it to say much if anything about the person quoted, only about the reader. But no doubt that's why books like this are advertised as "inspirational."

[The last time Donald Hall saw Henry Moore, he] talked about his new grandson and showed us drawings in a studio he had just built to extend his workday. We sat with a drink in the sunny living room he had added to the house which, when he moved to it during the war, had been a broken-down farmworker's cottage. I knew my man, and I asked him, "Now that you're eighty, you must know the secret of life. What is the secret of life?" With anyone else the answer would have begun with an ironic laugh, but Henry Moore answered me straight: "The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the most important thing is—it must be something you cannot possibly do!"


MAN RAY
Photography is not art.

JOAN WYNHAM (Love Lessons) Growth of strong immoral passion for [her teacher] Henry Moore. Today he hammered his thumb doing something to my armature and said "Bugger." There was blood all over the clay. During the rest I sat on the wood pile outside Trafalgar Studios and ate apples, and watched the bronze beetles running in and out of holes in the bark.
All subscriptions to Ballast (including gift subscriptions) must be mailed to the following address:

Ballast Quarterly Review
Attn: Subscription Fool
2022 X Avenue
Dysart, Iowa 52249-9767

Ballast is published in a limited edition and back issues are not generally available. However, any issue may be xeroxed to provide copies to others, but the copies must never be altered or sold. Rarely do we use unsolicited submissions, but readers are always encouraged to send offbeat material, verbal or visual, of the sort that the journal might publish. Original material must be explicitly labeled as such. Material that is not original must clearly make note of its author and source. All submissions are unpaid, and unsolicited material will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope.

Ballast does not have a budget as such. For nearly 17 years, it has operated at a loss. Such losses are currently offset by contributions from enlightened subscribers and generous deductions from the paycheck of the Subscription Fool. If anyone is foolishly philanthropic (foolish because such gifts are surely not tax deductible), we will sometimes accept a check.

Ballast has a collaborative affiliation with Leonardo: Journal of the International Society of Arts, Sciences, and Technology (MIT Press). As a result, some of the book reviews in Ballast are reprinted either on the Leonardo digital reviews web site at <http://mit-press2.mit.edu/e-journals/Leonardo/lrd.html> or in the printed magazine.

H E N R Y M I L L E R
Sometimes I wake up of a morning and, almost before I'm out of bed, I say to myself: "Today I'll do a Cézanne, by God!" Meaning one of those fugitive water-color landscapes which at first seem to be nothing but notes and suggestions. After a few heartbreaking efforts I realize that what I've got in hand is not going to be a Cézanne at all but just another Henry Miller what-you-may-call-it.

R U D O L F A R N H E I M
A teacher's self-esteem is most wholesomely tempered when he discovers what kind of persons his students admire besides him.

C A R L S A G A N
It is of interest to note that while some dolphins are reported to have learned English...no human being has been reported to have learned dophinese.

C O V E R Detail of an illustration in which the letter S is embedded in ice cream cones by C H R I S D U P O N T (2002). The phrase is of course a mnemonic with which to spell arithmetic.