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The Writer's Subject is Sometimes a Fiction

Edward Lotto

If I had been feeling braver, the title of this paper would have been somewhat different. Instead of claiming that the writer's subject is sometimes a fiction, I would have claimed that the writer's subject is always a fiction. But prudence won out in the end, and I chose to modify the model upon which my title is based, Walter Ong's prize-winning essay, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction." Ong can claim the audience is always a fiction since audience is such an abstract construct, but subject, the thing the writer is talking about, often seems distressingly concrete, as Dr. Johnson so directly demonstrated by kicking a stone. But the matter isn't as simple as Dr. Johnson would have us believe, especially when we turn from stones to topics of more interest. When we write about history or love or *Hamlet* or, God help us, literary criticism, some odd things happen to the subject.

In order to demonstrate what those odd things are, I must start with Ong's seminal essay, a work that not only gave birth to many of the ideas I will discuss here, but also served as a lens to focus many of the concerns I have with the way writing is discussed in our discipline. Let me start by repeating what Ong has to say about how audiences are created in the mind of the writer: "If the writer succeeds in writing, it is generally because he can fictionalize in his imagination an audience he has learned to know not from daily life but from earlier writers who were fictionalizing in their imagination audiences they had learned to know in still earlier writers, and so on back to the dawn of written narrative" (11). I want to claim that sometimes this is as true of subjects as it is of audiences. My basis for this claim lies in theoretical works on reading and literary theory. But before considering these works, I need to consider the idea of the subject of writing more carefully.

The subject, simply defined, is what the writer is talking about. It is the thing out there that is under discussion. But is the matter really so simple? Unless we are like Dr. Johnson and have the thing right there, at the end of our toe or at least within our sight, it is not out there in the sense that the speaker or writer can ask the listener or reader to perceive the object directly. And without the thing out there to point to, we are cast back into the slippery world of language, a world of signs and signifiers that has its own logic and rules. This is the world that the writer, for the most part, has to deal with since she almost never has the luxury of having the subject under discussion right in front of the reader. After all, with due apologies to geologists, how much can we say about rocks? Even if the writer were lucky enough to have the subject right in front of the reader, as for example, the writer of tour guides does, the situation would still be complex. The writer of tour guides can't simply point at the thing; he must first create the thing in the language and then hope that there is enough correspondence between his creation of the subject and the reader's so that the reader can pick out the object in question from everything surrounding her.

The essential question for any writer who cannot simply point to the object under consideration or who is not dealing with a subject that is a simple physical act, such as opening a window, is how to create this subject. This question is closely tied to the question of how we create meaning, or even of what meaning actually is, since in common practice meaning and subject are often freely interchanged. They are both something that we often, mistakenly I believe, conceive of as out there, away from the language we use to work with them. I think we make this mistake because our first use of language, and indeed much of our subsequent use of it, is tied to the physical world that can be perceived directly by both speaker and hearer. We first

use language to get something or to achieve some physical end. If this end is achieved, we assume that the hearer knows what we mean. And indeed, much of our language is used in this way. We say open the window and someone does just that. We come to see this surface action as the meaning since it is out there in the usual scientific sense: all of us, except for the marginal members of society such as the insane, can agree the window is closed, and we can open and close the window repeatedly under any conditions. But this is a very rough and simplistic definition of meaning. There is much more behind that simple act including the right or power I have to make you do something. The act itself only touches the surface of what is going on.

In order to understand what is going on, we need to consider the writer who, unlike the person asking someone to open the window or the tour guide, is not fortunate enough to have the subject in front of the reader. How does she manipulate the signs of language in order to give the reader the impression that some meaning exists on the page.

Let me start my argument by considering a single word. For the argument, any word will do, so we might as well use the already discussed "stone." Without the actual stone in front of him, the reader must fall back on his experience with stones, one which doubtless has much in common with the writer's experience with stones, since almost everybody has felt the weight of a stone in the hand and has injured some part of the body on a particularly ill-placed stone, but which also may well include some idiosyncratic experiences, some of which may be unprintable if not unspeakable.

But these differences in experience are only the beginning of our troubles in nailing down the objective meaning of the word "stone." Next we have to deal with the contexts in which the reader and writer have seen the word stone. There are rolling stones and sticks and stones, not to mention Stonehenge and stone crabs. The reader carries all the traces of these uses of "stone" when conceiving of the meaning of stone. And the situation is not made any simpler by adding words to "stone." If we say "gray stone," we eliminate many stones as the possible subject for this phrase, but we introduce a whole new set of contexts having to do with the word "gray." Every linguistic and experiential context in which the reader has encountered either "gray" or "stone" or the combination "gray stone" influences the possible connotations for the phrase. The contexts are something like ghosts crowded around a table, all trying to make their presence known. And the ghosts haunting the writer may be very different from those haunting the reader. How can we hope to keep this unruly pack in some sort of order?

The answer lies in Ong's ideas about audience, which I quoted above. If the writer has to fictionalize the audience from what she has read, the writer must also fictionalize the subject from previous experience with the words she uses. We know what stones are because we have had similar experiences with them in the world and also, and probably more important, because we have read similar, and often the same, written texts in which stones appear. Thus, the meaning and the subject exist in the web of shared language and shared experience we have. The writer depends on this web for the assurance that the words on the page make some sense, and the reader depends on the web in order to create the illusion of meaning in the text.

This view of the fictionality of the subject is buttressed by modern theories of reading and literary criticism. George Dillon argues explicitly against the idea that reading simply consists of extracting the propositional content of the text (12-17). Instead, he claims that readers are active in the making of meaning, using the text like a musical score, or perhaps better, a figured bass which guides the musician to certain patterns of notes yet which leaves the actual playing of the piece open to a wide

variety of interpretations depending on the knowledge, experience, and the skill of the player. Anthony Petrosky makes much the same point when he uses the work of Marilyn Adams and Allan Collins to claim that a "spoken or written text does not in itself carry meaning. Rather, a text only provides direction for the listener or reader as to how he should retrieve or construct the intended meaning from his own, previously acquired knowledge" (23).

And, drawing from the work of William James and Vygotsky, Louise Rosenblatt describes the source of this previously acquired knowledge in language reminiscent of the ghosts crowding around the table when she claims that the sense of a word is "the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by a word" and that these psychological events are "the experiential and linguistic reservoir, the cognitive and affective residue of our past experience with life and language, on which each must draw in any linguistic transaction, whether speaking or listening, writing or reading" (99). Modern literary theory agrees with the idea that meaning can never be fixed in language. Readers chase after the chimera of meaning, and it is this chase that fuels the desire to write and use language. Meaning itself is endlessly deferred, endlessly other to us.

But we needn't climb to the rarified heights of post-structural criticism to see that the subject in writing is difficult to objectify. We need only look to our own experience in teaching our students to write. Here we often rely on the rhetorical triangle to give some sense of the complexity of any writing situation. We explain that writers must take into consideration changes in audience and even changes in the way they want to present themselves, but seldom do we mention that the interplay between writer and audience is what, in part, creates the subject. In order to see the kinds of problems this failure can bring about, I'd like to discuss the work of some of the students I have tutored. Tutoring produces an excellent opportunity to see the motivation behind the words on the paper, something we can get from our students only if we listen.

The first example I would like to discuss is a student who came to me with an application she was writing in order to transfer to another school. Part of the application asked her to describe an autobiographical experience that was important to her education. She brought a draft of an essay that described a trip she had taken to England with her sister. The paper consisted of a basic five-paragraph theme that described the difficulty of travel in England, the historical sights she had seen, and the unusual punk styles in London. I asked her why she had picked these three topics, and she said it was because they all were part of her trip. She conceived of the subject as something out there that had happened to her, and she wanted to get all the parts of the experience into the essay. I then asked her in particular why she had included a description of her trip to the Tower of London, and she replied that going to the Tower of London was what everyone expected you to do, so the essay would be incomplete without that section. In essence, she had introduced this part of the paper because of her expectations of what the subject of a trip to England should contain. Later in the tutorial it came out that her expectations of what the essay should contain had yet another influence on the subject she wrote about. She had not included the fact that both she and her sister had been sick during much of the trip and blamed it on the food. She said that she excluded this fact because being sick was not what people wanted to hear about in an essay about a trip to England.

My tutorial with this student revealed that the subject matter she chose to include was being influenced by two opposing forces. The first was her perception that she should include what happened to her, and the second was her sense that she ought to conform to the conventions of the story about a trip to England. It is difficult to say where, exactly, her ideas about the conventions of this type of essay came from, but

it is likely they arose from a variety of contexts. Two possible sources are the publicity surrounding the recent royal wedding and what she had heard in her Anglophile English classes about Dickens and Merry Olde England. But whatever the source of the conventions, the tension between them and her perception of what actually happened to her produced a general travalogue that made her sound like a naive, easily impressed, provincial American, at least to my ears. When I told her this as gently as I could, she replied that she had simply written about what had happened, and the application simply asked for an autobiographical experience. I then mentioned that the application asked for an experience that had contributed to her education, and she replied that she had learned a great deal on her trip.

We were at an impasse in the tutorial. I changed the subject by pointing out that her application had no distinguishing characteristic; it would sound like everybody else's. This made her think for a while. I felt that precisely because the subject was out there, was something available to everyone, the essay would tell the readers nothing new and would probably be shifted to the bottom of the pile. To get around this problem, I asked the student what impression she wanted to convey with the essay. In essence I had changed the topic from subject to purpose. She claimed that she wanted to show that she had learned tolerance for the different ways people lived in the world, and I knew that we finally had a purpose in hand that could change the subject of the essay. In the end, she revised the essay to convey that purpose, and the application was, if not earth-shaking, at least a distinct improvement over the first disjointed draft.

My job as tutor had been, in the end, to get her to think about the purpose of the essay, yet this task was made difficult for her by her concentration on what she perceived as the external subject. The demands of this subject overwhelmed her sense of purpose, a sense she later claimed to have had from the very beginning in writing the essay. And the external demands of the subject she felt were of two types, the demands of fact and the demands of convention. Sometimes these two forces worked together, as in her trip to see the Tower which both occurred in fact and was sanctioned as a proper thing to do on such a trip, and sometimes they worked at cross purposes, as in her sickness. In this case, the demands of convention won out. In both cases the demands consisted of factors external to the writer and thus factors that were unchangeable, at least in the mind of this student. They were perceived as part of the real world.

Much of the difficulty our students have with controlling their rhetorical situations stems from this perception. They feel locked into telling what really happened or what really was there. What they don't realize is that what they perceive as being really there, which is what they call the subject, is shaped by a network of conventions and contexts which may be inappropriate for the rhetorical situation at hand. They, like most people, don't see that subjects and meaning are created out of shared contexts. There is, of course, nothing wrong with working within a set of conventions—we really have no choice in the matter—but when this network becomes rigid because it represents what is perceived as the real world, it becomes a roadblock in the way of teaching our students about rhetorical adaptability. At times, the strength of this roadblock gives the impression that the student is slow or rebellious whereas in fact he is just clinging to his perception of the world, something we all do with varying degrees of success.

Such a case occurred with a student I tutored last year. He wrote a personal experience paper on his golf team's winning season. His teacher had stressed the importance of shaping the material in a personal experience paper around some purpose and, in addition, had suggested that the paper should only cover a brief span of time, probably no more than an hour. The teacher spent time in class developing

examples of papers with a purpose and asked the students to think about their purposes carefully. This student turned in a long, rambling paper that mentioned every match in the season and stressed the hero of each one. It earned a C-. In tutoring the student, I found out that he, like the woman working on her application, felt that it was important to tell the story in the way he did because, as he put it, "That's the way it happened." I also found out that this same story was one he and his teammates had often talked about. I then realized that the story bore many of the marks of an oral tale. It was episodic, with each match being an episode, which was distinguished by the question of who had been the hero. In fact, almost everyone on the team had been a hero in one match or another.

In this case, the student perceived of the reality of the subject within an oral context that was probably further influenced by sports stories of various kinds. As the tutor, I simply presented him with my honest reaction to the essay. I found it drawn out and often tedious to read. The subject seemed boring. After much discussion, we negotiated a settlement. I admitted there was some purpose behind the paper, which was to show how all the members of the team contributed to the winning season, and he admitted that this purpose was not communicated effectively because most readers, as opposed to the members of the team, would just be bored by the long list of matches and scores. He saw that the subject would have to be modified to achieve his purpose. I felt that we had broken the tyranny of fact in his mind, and, indeed, his next paper was much better, an A-. In it he interviewed a friend and managed to convey a complex and subtle sense of his friend's character. In order to achieve this end, he had to select and order carefully the subject matter he presented.

The problems students have with the subject when they write about the world around them are exacerbated greatly when they attempt to write about literature. This is because when writing about literature the only subject "out there," in the sense that a stone is "out there," is plot summary. And even that isn't "out there" in the way a stone is; even a plot summary depends on what we see as being important in the literature. In fact, the biggest problem freshmen have in writing about literature is finding a subject at all. These difficulties arise, in large part, because freshmen have such limited experience with writing about literature, and such experience as they have is usually confined to the book report or the research paper, an undigested summary of what others have had to say about literature. They haven't seen enough examples and haven't, in Ong's terms, any connection with the ways in which other writers have created this subject in the past. These problems are compounded if the students are shown literary criticism that seems to them beyond anything they could ever hope to write. In this case, they have seen a subject, but they have no idea of the context that generated it.

Since these students don't have any idea of what the subject of a literary paper should be, they snap up any suggestions we give them with a desperate intensity. If we mention symbols, symbols come popping out of the students' papers with fearsome regularity; and if we mention foreshadowing, the whole world becomes a place of meaningful correspondences. If we don't mention anything, the students often fall back on plot summary, which as a subject at least has the advantage of being something with which they are familiar. If we give them no hints and specifically forbid plot summary, they grow desperate. I have never had a happier tutee than the one who came to me with an assignment to write on *Othello* without any hint of what she should say. As I sent her away thinking about the importance of the handkerchief, I could almost detect tears of gratitude in her eyes.

In teaching students to write about literature, we need to keep in mind the importance of providing the context out of which their papers will grow. They need

to see examples of the kind of writing they are expected to produce. The classroom teacher can provide written examples, and a tutor can simply summarize other papers students are working on. In doing this, we will work towards enabling our students to generate their own meaning within a set of conventions, thus enabling other readers to extract meaning from these essays. It is in this web of contexts that the subject resides, and our students must become a part of this web if they are ever to write about literature in a way that the community of academic readers will find meaningful.

Of course, we might ask if we really want to teach our students to write like academic critics. After all, academic criticism is a rather narrow genre and one that is not designed for the vast majority of intelligent readers. But the question of what to teach is too large to be explored in this essay. It is enough to note that teaching students to write about any subject entails far more than simply asking them to write about what they see, for what they see is controlled by the ways in which they have been taught to see. And it is particularly important to keep this in mind when asking our students to write about literature since this subject exists not on the solid page but in the idiosyncratic transaction we call reading, a transaction shaped by cultural, societal, and psychological contexts. In writing about literature, we can say with some confidence that the subject is not something out there that writers must look for but is instead something they must create in themselves. In this case, at least, the writer's subject is always a fiction.

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