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From Formal Class to Community:

**an experiment in the teaching of
french prose composition**

French composition courses, part of the honors and major programs in French at McGill, have an essential but somewhat unappreciated role to play in the education of undergraduate students. Their aim is to determine, and then increase, the students' ability in written French so as to enable them to master the range of expression and thus, to broaden and deepen their comprehension of literary texts. The difficulties which lie in wait for both students and instructors demand an exploration of the conditions necessary for creating a sympathetic state of mind, a viable program and an appropriate pedagogical method for this kind of course.

the state of mind

The prospect of a compulsory course of French prose composition risks giving the student who wants to specialize in French literature a false and regrettable impression of intellectual regression. He may feel he will somehow be returning to high school where he worked laboriously on dictations and wrote rather wooden compositions. Now, at a time when he is eager to explore the writings of the great authors and to criticize their works, he finds he is required to refine his knowledge of the elusive material with which he has to work, that is the French language.

In asking him to increase his vocabulary, to discover the nuances of synonyms and to elucidate the principles which rule written French, will we not deflate the pleasure he is anticipating? Certainly, bringing the student to the realization of his shortcomings is always an unpleasant task, but in the present instance, it is no less important to take some of the mystique out of the appreciation of great literature than it is

to give language its proper place. There is no doubt that this task could be easier if the student were not continually discovering that some of his teachers have a constant tendency to decry the plebeian character of language over against the aristocratic nature of literature. The creation of this curious scale of values may be of benefit to those who use literary obscurantism to cloak pedagogical shortcomings but the student, for his part, can gain nothing by absorbing this prejudice. It will always be true that the classicism of Madame de Lafayette, the romanticism of Victor Hugo or the realism of Flaubert, will remain largely inaccessible to the student as long as he has not submitted himself to the rigors of a course in French prose composition. Besides enlarging his comprehension of the texts, such a course will prepare him to compose in French his criticism of the great literary works.

This is a point of quite basic significance. Just as the serious student of the history of painting must himself take brush and palette in hand and face a blank canvas and the student of musicology must himself attempt his own compositions and arrangements on the keyboard, so too the serious student of French literature must be required to write in the French language. And as long as the student has not patiently explored the nuances of synonyms and attempted his own compositions at the different levels of language, he will not grasp that, for the authors he is studying, the act of creative writing resolves itself into the choice of words and particular phrases. He will also have to discover the living principles of the written language and thus will be able to appreciate better the literature composed in it. To that end, it is necessary to reconcile in the student's mind the mischievously divorced ideas of language and literature.

a program divided in three parts

Obviously many methods could be employed in the conduct of a course in French prose composition. For example, the description of the different levels of language — of which the student has only intuitively a vague idea — can serve as a very effective introduction. My experience has led me to choose a yearly program composed of three elements worked out simultaneously so as to vary the effort required from the student.

1. The first part of the course consists of the analysis of literary texts by the use of concepts such as the archaisms, neologisms, dialecticisms, intellectual and affective results

of the terms employed. In thus placing the texts in their proper time and location and identifying the effects envisaged by the authors, we develop an analysis which aids the comprehension of the composition. The reward for the student gained by this effort consists in establishing the close connection between the stylistic discipline he has undertaken and his literary curiosity.

2. The second element of this program is in itself less difficult. It aims at broadening the vocabulary of the student by means of lists of words grouped around *des centres d'intérêts*. The student has a welcome opportunity to authenticate the words by placing them in a number of different contexts, for he is asked to compose short contexts for each new word or phrase. This enables him, among other things, to discover the relativity of the idea of synonym.
3. The final effort which is required from the student is the most demanding. He is asked to write regularly short pieces which illustrate various literary modes such as description and narration, while conforming to the exigencies of the *dissertation française*. In this way, he will approach the standards required from him in his courses of French literature.

a collective project with a pedagogical formula

Maybe more than others, courses in French prose composition give an opportunity to get close to the students. The control of the semantic content of words gives rise in turn to humor, surprise and fruitful discussion; criticizing texts together enables the students to express themselves more and more freely; and the coordination of individual exercises in workshop-type courses creates opportunities for an endless dialogue with the instructor. But if the human contacts are favored, the subject of the course remains demanding and the student is not always in the mood to appreciate the delicate shades of meaning of dialecticisms or archaisms . . . moreover to write regularly an average of thirty lines in a controlled style in a foreign language is not an easy task. Thus, it is very important to find ways of relaxing the pedagogical pace.

These two last years, my students and I decided to create an anthology toward the end of the second term. Each student chose a subject and had about ten days to prepare the outline of his article. Then, the topics were all presented and discussed informally in class. The only requirement laid down was that the students' work should be connected with their personal

experiences or tastes.

The first class discussion of these exercises gave an interesting opportunity to classify the different types of reports which were to make up our "book": criticisms of books or films or plays, art exhibitions or musical occasions; descriptions of cities or countries which had been visited; translations into French of poetry or prose from the different mother-tongues represented in the group; and original compositions of poems or short stories. All these different types of articles called for varied methods and efforts and gave an opportunity to discover *in vivo* the working of the abstract notions acquired in class during the first months.

The second step for the students consisted in writing a rough draft of their articles and in formulating precise questions on the problems they had met in the process of their work. These questions covered a wide range from vocabulary to problems of literary style. After this collective discussion, most of the students asked to see me in my office so that they might review further some of their difficulties. This provided me with a very rich opportunity to get a sense of the impact of our common experience. It is most remarkable that all of the students, without exception, willingly found the time to bring their project, documentation and questions to me. In these friendly and fruitful conversations, we often discovered and explored their general difficulties in the study of the French language. I was surprised to discover that some of the students had previously started novels or poems and wanted to talk to me about them.

In December 1973, I suggested to one of my colleagues giving the same type of course that his students and mine should collaborate in a similar production. This time, we chose a particular theme: "Montréal." All the articles were to describe one or another aspect of town. We got a very interesting result with a variety of points of view covering the geography, the legends, the history, the seasons, the architecture, the poetry of our city.

Finally it should be added that, as a result of our work together, what began as a formal, scheduled class became more and more a community of persons readily interchanging ideas and experiences of learning and maturation. When one has reached that point, and only then, has one crossed the boundary between trade school instruction and education at the true university level.