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Why I Write

James Boyd White*

It is a great honor for me to speak to you on this occasion, celebrating the publication of such an original and important book. It is a pleasure of a different kind as well, for Lash LaRue is an old and good friend, and I welcome the chance to join with others in congratulating him.

When I was asked to speak here, I asked Lash what I should talk about. Since I have written books that are somewhat like his, in that they connect law with other forms of thought and discourse, including literature, he suggested that I might want to talk about what it is like to engage in such writing — what motivates it, what rewards it brings, what problems it presents; what it is like, in his precise words, "to write weird books." That seemed fine to me, all the more because I am at a stage in life where a certain amount of retrospection may be called for, or at least forgiven. In what follows I will be speaking for the most part not so much about writing that connects different disciplines, as about writing itself; and about this I will work as I usually do, out of my own experience, including my experience of reading.

I want to begin with an anecdote: When I was first looking for a job in law teaching, more than twenty-five years ago, the head of the appointments committee at the University of Colorado, where I was soon to start out, told me: "This is a teaching school. The student comes first. There is no publish or perish here." I greatly admired that statement, as a matter of principle, and still do. A very fine law school was built upon it.

But I have to admit that at the time the remark had an additional appeal of a distinct and more personal kind: for while I was deeply interested in teaching, and in learning to teach — I saw it as an activity to build a life upon — I was very doubtful indeed about writing, and especially concerned that I would find myself trying to write in a way that was not authentic to me but meant only to satisfy others. The idea of trying to write with some-

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one looking over my shoulder, telling me that it was or was not "good enough," was not appealing. The prospect of a life devoted to teaching, however, without having to worry about writing, was wonderful.

As things have worked out, perhaps surprisingly, I have had a rather happy life as a writer, and today I want to talk about a certain part of that life: why I write, and who it is that I write for. As I say, this topic is suggested partly by the similarity between my work and Professor LaRue's, for both connect law and literature, and both use the term "rhetoric" to do so; neither fits neatly into a preexisting academic or professional category; and the tone and motive of both is somewhat more personal, perhaps less academic, than is usually the case. Professor LaRue and I are workers in the same vineyard, and it may be appropriate for me to say something about the kind of work we do.

But I also want to take advantage of this occasion to make a larger and somewhat inconsistent point about writing, including the kind of writing that professors do, namely that what may look at first like the same activity — "Writing" — is actually very different in different lives, with different motivations and significances. It may look as though we are all doing the same thing, as we huddle over our typewriters or computers, producing work called articles or books, but we are in fact often doing very different things, and I think it is important to recognize and value these differences, in ourselves and in others.

The correlative of writing is reading, and here there is an analogous point to be made: Despite surface similarities, reading, like writing, is not the same for all of us, and the differences deserve attention and respect. We are moved to read, and to choose what we read, by different questions and hopes, and the meaning of any particular text is different for each of us. For the meaning of text, its deepest meaning, is not in the text itself, nor even in the response of an ideal reader; it is in the place the text holds in our actual and individual lives, in the kind of life it stimulates and the kind of transformations it works there. Such an understanding of what reading is, or can be, seems to me an essential part of a writer's equipment, for it sharpens one's sense of the possibilities inherent in writing itself. Perhaps it is the first thing a writer needs.

In one sense what has driven my writing, what must drive it, is an engagement with certain questions; and in my case, in addition, a love of certain texts and the worlds they make, expressing itself in attentiveness to the reality of their felt demands. As a reader of texts, my desire has been to do justice to them and to my experience of them. Today, however, I will be mainly concerned with another dimension of the process, focusing not so much on why it is worth attending to these questions and

texts, and writing in aid and fulfillment of that attention, but on writing as a public act, to a real and contemporary audience.

I.

My exploration of what writing has been for me will begin not with writing but with reading, my first real reading, of Thoreau's *Walden*, which I will discuss at some length. As a boy of thirteen, I heard, I don't remember how, of Henry David Thoreau, the man who had gone to live in a cabin beside a pond in the woods, alone for a year, and that he had written a book about his experience. I instantly knew I wanted that book, and ordered it from the bookstore. I waited weeks for it to come, which it finally did, from Modern Library, in a wrapper marked with golden-browns and green. I can remember holding it in my hand, wondering at its reality, and the miracle by which it arrived. I remember its heft and smell.

I read it through, several times, not understanding long reaches of it, which seemed dull and talky, but feeling that at other places it spoke for me as nothing ever had, especially in the moments where Thoreau expressed a sense of unity with the world of nature. The woods he inhabited were, after all, continuous with the woods I knew, fifteen miles away, and I too escaped into them, as Thoreau did; as I had earlier escaped into the woods that surrounded the tiny hamlet just outside Washington where I had spent the war years; as I had escaped to the trees and fields of the parks in Hartford, where we had moved next, and to the waters and beaches of Cape Cod in the summer.

And as I still do. This paper is being written in a small and ill-furnished cabin, really a shack, without running water or electricity, on some land we own in the hills southwest of Ann Arbor. The cabin looks out on a pond. I come here at least one day a week, winter and summer, to walk and think — and write.

Thoreau escaped from civilization to the woods; but once there he spent his time writing the journals that were to become his book. Hardly an escape from civilization, then. I do the same thing myself; I go into solitude in order to write. What is this activity, for him, for me?

* * *

Back to the reading. What can Thoreau's *Walden* have meant to the boy who pored over its pages? I can remember laboring through section after section, especially at the beginning, that seemed to me utterly dull.

It was an act of faith to read it through. But the faith had a basis, not only in the idea of living alone in the woods, which had originally captivated me, but in the freshness and directness of the opening sentences:

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months.¹

But Thoreau cannot maintain this tone. In the very next sentence he lapses into a kind of self-conscious and portentous voice that will characterize much of his work: "At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again." Next he is awkward and didactic: "I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life . . ." — as though he were writing this book to supplement answers already given to particular questions asked by particular people, which cannot be. Then, self-conscious again: "In most books the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking." Then he tries humor, of the kind Twain would do well but in Thoreau sounds lame: "I should not talk about myself if there were anyone else I knew as well. Unfortunately I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience." Then, however, he says something of a different kind, in a different voice:

Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me.²

In this sentence there are seeds of much that is to come: Thoreau's belief that all writing is autobiographical; his sense that writing is a way in which one whole person speaks to another, speaking that can be sincere or false; his insistent reliance on the teachings of his own experience; and his recognition that the experience of others, if real, will be different from his, and in this way of potential value.

1. HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *Walden*, in WALDEN AND OTHER WRITINGS 107, 107 (Joseph Wood Krutch ed., Bantam Books 1981) (1854).

2. *Id.*

From this point, however, he lapses into pages and pages of a kind of preaching, directed mainly at his townspeople: they who lead lives of self-inflicted penance, who think they are rich but are poor, "young men . . . whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle and farming tools" And later: "The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost." How, he asks, can we complain of southern slavery when we know so many forms of it ourselves? "Look at the teamster in the highway, wending to market by day or night; does any divinity stir within him?"

This is all a kind of Jeremiad, an attack on the wasted lives of others; the tone is strident and didactic. It can be summed up in the famous sentence, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." I am sure I did not notice this when I read it the first time, but to me it is now obvious that the real desperation here is Thoreau's, and that it is enacted in his tense and aggressive style, his declamations and pronouncements, his condemnation of others. He seems to be aiming at a kind of philosophy, a language of moral generalization; while I know others have found it valuable, to me it was, and is, tiresome.

I can remember reading these pages through the first time, frustrated, as if waiting for something; I think I was waiting for the tone of the opening pages to return, and return it finally does. Listen to the clarity of the sentence that opens the following paragraph. This will be followed by a couple of self-conscious declamations, but Thoreau will then return to the true notes of his style, simple and plain, full of life and immediacy:

Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down some tall arrowy white pines, still in their youth, for timber. It is difficult to begin without borrowing, but perhaps it is the most generous course thus to permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise. The owner of the axe, as he released his hold on it, said that it was the apple of his eye; but I returned it sharper than I received it. It was a pleasant hillside where I worked, covered with pine woods, through which I looked out on the pond, and a small open field in the woods where pines and hickories were springing up. The ice in the pond was not yet dissolved, though there were some open spaces, and it was all dark colored and saturated with water. There were some slight flurries of snow during the days that I worked there; but for the most part when I came out on to the railroad, on my way home, its yellow sand heap stretched away gleaming in the hazy atmosphere, and

the rails shone in the spring sun, and I heard the lark and pewee and other birds already come to commence another year with us.³

This moment of stylistic transformation comes, not accidentally, just as Thoreau speaks of his arrival at Walden, of his beginning to work and live there. The didactic and assertive style of the preceding pages, his podium style, is the style of Concord; what he gives us now will be the style of Walden. And the Concord that he leaves behind is not other people's but his own; it is not others who have been enslaved, who lead lives of imprisonment and penance and emptiness and desperation, but Thoreau himself. In going to Walden, and learning to write about it, he leaves behind a part of the self, a certain way of being, in order to make other things possible, both in his experience and in his writing. In his Journal he shows that he knows this when he says, four years before taking the step he contemplates, "I want to go soon and live away by the pond, where I shall hear only the wind whispering in the reeds. It will be success if I shall have left myself behind."⁴ In the rest of *Walden*, Thoreau builds upon his new voice and style beautifully, making the music that is his to write. In chapters like "Sounds" and "Ponds," for example, he is able to maintain this tone virtually without flaw or interruption, creating new visions of the possibilities of life.

His achievement is of course partly a matter of imagining himself more and more fully at home in the world of nature, but it is an activity of culture as well. He was well-read in both Latin and Greek, and his mind is full of allusions to those literatures, as it is to the Vedic literature of India he had recently discovered. Not nature as opposed to culture, then, but nature as the place where culture can most fully have its place; the word itself tells us this, for "culture" and "cultivate" refer to organic as well as intellectual processes. When Thoreau says, "Morning brings back the heroic ages," he is referring to his own reading of the *Iliad* and other such texts, and bringing it to bear on his life by the pond. The promise is ultimately one of wholeness and integration, the inclusion in a single vision of the various parts of human existence.

In writing about them, Thoreau transforms the two years that he lived by the pond into one, starting and stopping on Independence Day. The late summer and fall are thus presented as a season of beginning; the winter, of normalcy; when spring comes, as the final chapter of the book, it works a grand conversion of what we have known into something else

3. *Id.* at 135.

4. Journal Entry of Henry David Thoreau (Dec. 24, 1841), in *THE JOURNALS* 93 (B. Torrey & F. Allen eds., Dover ed. 1962) (1906).

entirely, a vision of the whole world as organic transformation. We have been prepared for this in many ways, most recently perhaps in his account of the ice on the pond, seemingly so solid, which in fact ripples in the wind like water; seemingly so local, but in fact it is cut and packed in sawdust and sold around the world, to India and China: "The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges." Ice is actually not a solid at all, but full of air, in bubbles that form patterns — "ice has its grain as well as wood" — and it collapses into mush. It rings like a gong when struck with an axe on a cold morning, then softens and loses its resonance, then booms on its own as it refreezes at night: "Who would have suspected so large and cold and thick-skinned a thing to be so sensitive?"

It is not only the ice that is organic. In a famous passage, Thoreau describes the patterns made in the railway bank as the ice in the sand melts and runs down the steep incline, in forms that imitate those of vegetation:

Innumerable little streams overlap and interlace one with another, exhibiting a sort of hybrid product, which obeys half way the law of currents, and half way that of vegetation. As it flows it takes the form of sappy leaves or vines, making heaps of pulpy sprays a foot or more in depth, and resembling, as you look down on them, the lacinated lobed and imbricated thalluses of some lichens; or you are reminded of coral, of leopards' paws or birds' feet, of brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds

. . . You find thus in the sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf. . . . Even ice begins with delicate crystal leaves, as if it had flowed into moulds which the fronds of water plants have impressed on the watery mirror. The whole tree itself is but one leaf, and rivers are still vaster leaves whose pulp is intervening earth, and towns and cities are the ova of insects in their axils.

. . . .

Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principles of all the operations of Nature.⁵

In this book Thoreau both lives a life and writes about it; the life, and the writing, are transformative, carrying him from a kind of despairing conformity — expressed in the strident and judgmental tones of a man condemning his neighbors for *their* despair and conformity — to what he represents as a whole and authentic life, expressed in a style that is immediate, particular, and alive. In the process his sense of the world changes; it becomes instinct with life and change. His writing is not only

5. THOREAU, *supra* note 1, at 329-32.

the record of this transformation, it is the agent of it. He writes himself from one condition to another.

I once found myself reading this book, later in life, at a time of personal difficulty, and came upon the phrase, "Walden Pond is melting apace"; I felt it true of me, and I think Thoreau felt it true of him as well: the frozen pond, the frozen feelings, the frozen language, all here melt, most beautifully in the passage quoted above, but not only there — throughout, as part of the deep rhythm of the text as a whole, and its movement towards meaning and metaphor: "The sun is but a morning star."

To the boy reading this book, then, it promised not only an imagined escape to the woods, but the transformation of that escape into something else, a way of being with language and in the world — and the world not only of nature, but of other people — through writing.

II.

Of course I would not have consciously known all this at the time, but you can perhaps see some of the elements of this text that appealed to me as a boy, and still do: its insistence on authenticity as a criterion of life and speech; its assumption that writing is an act of the whole mind and person, directed to a whole mind and person; its way of using the materials of inherited culture not in rituals of deference, but to make one's own life richer and better; its sense that writing can be about what matters most in life, and can indeed transform it. To read this piece of writing is to imagine oneself something of a writer too.

What about my own writing, such as it then was? For the most part it was, as is no doubt true for most people at that age, the writing of assigned papers of one sort or another, performances over which I labored, as I labored in school more generally, to meet the expectations of others. I would never have dreamed that I was asked in a paper to think or speak for myself, to reflect the processes of my own mind or the nature of my own experience. I think I had the idea that there was a right way to write, as there was a right way to dress and talk and behave, and that I was supposed to learn it.

At the same time, I did have yearnings to become a writer of quite another kind, a Writer, living say on the Left Bank in Paris, wearing a beret, smoking cigarettes and drinking absinthe; but, as you can see, this imagined future had in it almost nothing of writing, a great deal of an imagined bohemian life.

At college, however, my sense of writing was utterly transformed by an extraordinary course in freshman composition. Imagine showing up in a required class in freshman writing and being asked as your first assignment to write a paper, due the next class, in response to questions like these:

English 1

Thurs.-Fri., Sept. 20-21:

During the last few days you have been asked a great many questions by a lot of people. Try to recall exactly what some of these questions were by making a list of those you can remember. Look the questions over and ask yourself what all this questioning has been about.

- a) Select 5 questions from your list, ranging from foolish to interesting, marking the most foolish with a # and the most interesting with a *.
- b) Why do you apply the adjectives "foolish" and "interesting" to these particular questions?
- c) What has all this questioning been about? How do you explain this social manifestation? After all you can go to lots of places, to a hotel, to a country club, and not be subjected to such persistent questioning. What's going on here?

These questions astounded me. They were unlike anything I had ever seen. To begin with, they asked me to speak out of my own experience — as if I had any! — which I don't think anyone else had ever done; and they assumed that this experience included making judgments of my own, and judgments about such things as "foolish" and "interesting." I was thought to have my own scale of values; to be able to set my own speech and conduct, and that of others, on that scale; and to have something to say about how I did this — about what my scale was, where it came from, how and why I applied such labels as "foolish" and "interesting" to my experience, and so on.

Yet more: notice the opposition to "foolish": it is not "wise" — you can imagine what my eighteen-year-old self would have to say about wisdom — but "interesting." (This was in fact a way of defining "wisdom" for me, and for the others in the class, in terms of our experience of finding things interesting.) This in turn assumed that we did find things interesting and that we were motivated by our interests, rather than, say, by the demands or expectations of others or by our own careerism or ambition. Such a person as the one we were assumed to be would naturally be interested in his own interests, interested in saying something about them, interested in speaking in his own voice about his experience of life and language and himself. The questions thus assumed, and in

making this assumption created a demand, that each of us had a self, had experience, had something to say of his own — that each of us was a center of meaning and value and language. They created a vacuum each one of us had to fill. All this was expected of us.

More still: This course invited us to see our world as made up of languages, of different ways of talking; to see our college, for example, not as a thing or a structure, but as a set of more or less shared expectations as to how to talk and live, and much the same could be said of other institutions, from country clubs to the law. Each of these languages consisted of patterns of response and action, which could be learned, and learned well or badly. If one learned them by rote, unreflectively, one might become too much shaped by these patterns, by social and moral clichés, and perhaps never be capable of independent thought and action. (Think of what it means to be raised in a culture in which "race" is assumed to be a feature of all human beings.) The task of life was therefore a writing task, to learn to use our various languages reflectively, in such a way that we controlled them rather than they us; to use them to express our own experience, or to attain our ends; and this meant learning to have both experience and ends worthy of the name in the first place. This, too, perhaps the primary process of living, required a reflective and constant negotiation with the languages that had authority in our world, the languages that sought to tell us what our experience was and what our ends should be.

The course that ensued asked us to respond to three such assignments each week. For me it was transforming, teaching me to see that I had a life and voice of my own, and showing me as well that I was responsible for what I wrote. If a paper was full of clichés, or written in a stultifying student-voice, or sounded like a bad sermon, that was my doing, and the consequences for me, if I continued to do so, were severe — not in terms of a grade in the course or anything like that, but severe in my life, for this writing was a definition and expression of my mind.

The task the course set me, then, was the direct analogue of Thoreau's task: to write my way out of Concord, out of false and inauthentic forms of speech and thought, to a kind of Walden, to a voice and language of my own. Writing for me thus became a way of creating a voice with which to speak and be, with which to represent and transform my own experience.

The experience about which I wanted to write, which I wanted to shape, included the experience of reading. This was brought home for me especially at college, where I learned that the meaning of a work of literature was not its message but the experience of mind and imagination

that it offered the reader. At the same time I came to see that this experience was incomplete until it had been made the object of writing, if only for oneself. Writing was an essential part of reading; reading, both of great literature and of the texts and languages that made up our immediate world, was in turn an essential part of life's experience, affording materials for thought and conversation.

III.

When I began to teach law, as I said earlier, my idea was that teaching would be my art form. I thought of the class as my creation in much the way I saw an argument or brief as one. Though I greatly admired works of legal learning, such as many of the classic treatises, the voice and form of the typical law review article were not congenial to me, and I could see no ready way to modify them for my purposes. The main problem was that this writing generally assumed that a certain language of analysis, and indeed the language of the law itself, was unproblematically adequate to its purposes; but for me no language was (or is) non-problematic; what I wanted to do was to think about legal language, and the language of legal analysis, before using it. And of course I could not be sure my thinking would bring me to a satisfactory position. My "writing" would be my teaching.

And so it was, for several years, though as part of my teaching I began to put together a set of materials for a seminar then called "The Nature of Legal Expression," the subject of which was the nature of legal thought and language, particularly as compared with other possibilities, including literary ones.

This course was meant to give law students something like the experience I had at college, of being asked real questions about their own actual experience as people, and also about their ways of imagining or envisioning their roles as lawyers. I would work through a question as completely as I could with readings and questions, then turn the problem over to the students. My questions defined a space which was theirs to fill as they thought best, in whatever way did most justice to their minds and experience — but subject to the discipline of being read by others, with admiration or the reverse.

This was thus a writing course, meant to create a set of occasions on which the individual student could work his way first to a clearer sense of his own voice as a general matter, and then to a sense of what possibilities for meaning and experience the life of the law, as he imagined it, could offer. Often the students started out with a rather glum sense of these

things, feeling that their lives were increasingly dominated by the language of the law, which seemed to many of them a most unsatisfactory language for any human purposes. One hope of the course was to help my students see that the resources and limits of their languages, legal and other, could become the subject of conscious attention; and that if this happened, it might become imaginable that they should be to some degree in control of their languages, rather than the other way round. This in turn held out the possibility that the life of the lawyer could be imagined as one of literary and ethical art, a drama of the first significance. I hoped that some of the students at least would come to see the practice of law as offering the opportunity for writing in the best and fullest sense of the term — as original and authentic action with language and with others.

Like my English course at college, this course was meant to offer the students an opportunity to write their own way from Concord to Walden. And as you can see, it was based on the premises I had found in Thoreau: that all writing is autobiographical, and a present engagement of mind with language; that it can be a way for a whole person to speak to a whole person; that, ideally at least, it can be either authentic and sincere or imitative and manipulative; that it is always problematic, for our languages to some degree control our mind and action; that the test of meaning has to be one's own experience; and that a writing and expressive life lived on such terms as these can be charged with significance.

When the course seemed to me in pretty good shape I had the idea that someone might publish it, which turned out, from my point of view miraculously, to be true. But this was not a text written for publication: it was written to my students. Its publication simply made available a part of what was going on in my classroom. *The Legal Imagination*⁶ is a teaching book.

IV.

My next writings also emerged from the classroom, the first a case-book on criminal procedure, with James Scarborough, which elaborated a vision of law as a certain kind of thought, one that works by questioning and by argument. The second was based on some connections I felt to exist between my legal work and other reading I was doing.

As I read the *Iliad*, for example, I could see that the text, in its very language, made real an imagined human culture: a set of practices of mind and language that defined certain ways of thinking and feeling, and a

6. JAMES BOYD WHITE, *THE LEGAL IMAGINATION: STUDIES IN THE NATURE OF LEGAL THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION* (1973).

certain way of constructing the social and natural worlds. In this case the culture was an heroic one, based on the value of honor. The poet wrote in this language, of course, but he found a way to criticize it while he used it; this mode of criticism lay in the imaginative and affective experience the poem created for its reader, and in the community it thus established with him.

Is such an art as this more generally possible, I wondered, even in the law? This started me off on a chain of reading, of Plato and Thucydides, Swift and Johnson, Austen and Burke, the Constitution of the United States and *McCulloch v. Maryland*. All this was meant as a way of exploring different languages and cultures, the arts by which they are used well and ill, and the complex process by which such judgments of quality must be made — for we are all embedded in the languages and cultures we simultaneously use and criticize. I started teaching a course to think about these possibilities. Over a series of years I shaped and reshaped that course, adding one text, deleting another, shifting my understanding of their relation, until at last I had a sequence with a shape and meaning. This was the origin of my book, *When Words Lose Their Meaning*,⁷ which was a written version of that course.

The subject of the book is a highly general one: making meaning in language in relation to other people. This complex intellectual, linguistic, and ethical practice is the activity of which law, poetry, philosophy, history, and indeed the verbal activities of ordinary life are branches. The book's question, which drove the reading behind it, is how to engage in this practice well; this includes not only how to use our languages well, but how to transform them; and, beyond that, how to create good relations, or communities, with the others to whom, or about whom, we speak. Hence the subtitle of the book: *Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community*.

When I thought of turning this course into a book there arose a serious writing problem for me: Who was to be its audience? If I wrote a series of essays directed to those who specialized in the relevant texts, assuming what one would normally assume about what they had read and knew and cared about, the book would not have held together at all. It would have looked like an assemblage of articles from different professional journals, utterly fragmented. Instead, I wrote, or tried to write, as a person who was in a sense independent of any of these professional communities, to a reader similarly situated, on the assumption that both

7. JAMES BOYD WHITE, *WHEN WORDS LOSE THEIR MEANING: CONSTITUTIONS AND RECONSTITUTIONS OF LANGUAGE, CHARACTER, AND COMMUNITY* (1984).

of us could make our own judgments about these texts. I thought of the book as a room with many doors, each representing one of the texts discussed: the reader would enter by way of one or another doors, rightly insisting that in speaking of the text she knew well, I make good sense to her as an expert; but once within the room, each reader was, like me, an amateur with respect to the rest, or most of them. In the notes at the end of the book I spoke to those who knew the secondary literature in each of the fields, establishing my own views in that context, but in the body of the text I tried to present myself as a single mind, speaking in a single voice, to a person similarly free of professional constraint. A major point of the book was in fact to establish such a possibility.

In writing this book, then, I felt that I was not writing as a lawyer, or a literary critic, or a classicist, or an historian of philosophy, or in any other definable professional role, but as a person, as a mind struggling to shape my own education, writing about what these texts meant to me; and not what they meant in some imaginary or hypothetical way, but what they meant to me really, as contributions to my life. Likewise, the audience I addressed was not simply a lawyer, or critic, or classicist, but the person who occupied those roles, the person engaged in his or her education, of which texts in each of these fields might properly be a part. In fact, in both books it was in large part the relation between the individual mind and his or her language that was my subject.

What I have said of my early writing is largely true of my subsequent books as well, most of which were written in large measure by being taught, and each of which is about a fundamental process of human life: *Justice as Translation*⁸ is about the process of representing and responding to what another has said, or what is now called "interpretation," but with an awareness that the gap between mind and mind, language and language, can never be closed; *Acts of Hope*⁹ is about the process of claiming and resisting authority that is built into social life and language use — both reading and writing — at the deepest level; and *"This Book of Starres"*¹⁰ is about the process by which in reading a work, or set of works, by another mind one comes to inhabit a different world, even a different culture, in this case with very large consequences, at least for me. In taking as a

8. JAMES BOYD WHITE, *JUSTICE AS TRANSLATION: AN ESSAY IN CULTURAL AND LEGAL CRITICISM* (1990).

9. JAMES BOYD WHITE, *ACTS OF HOPE: CREATING AUTHORITY IN LITERATURE, LAW, AND POLITICS* (1994).

10. JAMES BOYD WHITE, "THIS BOOK OF STARRES": LEARNING TO READ GEORGE HERBERT (1994).

subject a fundamental human process each book also faces the question of art thus presented, namely how this can be done well, or badly. Each book thus seeks a kind of generalization, not through the articulation of propositions of general application, but by focusing attention on aspects of human experience that are widespread or fundamental. The sort of truth they seek to articulate is not theoretical or propositional in kind, but what I have called "literary," that is, grounded on the assumption that most meaningful statements on such subjects are not really statements at all, but performances of mind and language.

* * *

So: Why do I write, and who is it that I write for? To begin with the second half of the question, I hope you will understand what I mean when I say that, despite having certain professional qualifications and taking pride in them, I do not in the main write as professional to professional, but as person to person, or mind to mind. My subject matter is my own experience of reading and thought and life, reflected upon and presented in the hope that it will be of interest to another, who can compare this experience with his own. Of course, I do write about what it means to have a professional language, a professional role, and how to think about these things, and I hope these reflections are of professional value. But the main relationship I hope to establish is not with a profession, but with the individual reader; the value of that relationship is for me close to the center of the value of writing itself.

As I said at the outset, the experience I write out of is in part an experience of reading, a fact that itself perhaps requires a word of explanation. It is not obvious after all why one would spend good time silently turning the pages of a book, indeed of book after book, when there is so much else in life to do. Reading may be, indeed in some sense it is, a substitution for another and more immediate existence, and the question is, "Why do it?" or at least, "Why do it more than you absolutely have to?"

One answer is implicit in my account of reading Thoreau, which is that reading can itself be an experience, and one deeply connected to the rest of life. Most broadly defined, to include all reflection on the expression of others, reading is I think essential to an education of a certain sort; not the kind of education that makes lists of books read, or can categorize them by theme or type, but the education of a mind struggling to understand itself and its circumstances. It is like travel, to different places and cultures, for it can give us a richer language in which to think about and shape our lives, and in doing so can offer the self a wider range and resonance; at the same

time it is social, for one is in contact with a variety of different minds, who can be one's teachers. In the best kind of reading one learns to see texts as written, from the point of view of their writer: to see each word or gesture as chosen out of an array of possibilities, and to see these choices as significant. This makes reading almost a form of writing as well as a form of learning. Both reading and writing are ways of creating as well as representing experience and memory, and putting them to use.

All this is based upon a vision of life as education; it rests on a sense of the reality of the unseen world, the world of imagination and memory, which gives meaning to the world we see and touch. I have found in fact that as my life goes on, it becomes increasingly an inner life, as my memories create an increasing sense of individual differentiation. This at once gives rise to a sharper need for conversation with others — conversation in reading, conversation in writing — and makes its difficulties more apparent.

In some sense, indeed, what is most real is the world of the mind. Without memory and its correlative, imagination, the present is simply a spot of light moving through darkness. With their aid, however, it is possible to feel increasingly a part of a world that exists outside of time, extending not only through our own lives, but, by means of shared experience and memory, often in the form of writing, through centuries.

Memories do not fall randomly, but arrange themselves into patterns which have the form of stories or narratives, and we use these to shape our lives. This is what we mean by reflection on experience. For virtually every situation in life presents the occasion for comparison with other, prior situations that are both similar and different: I turn to lift a top off a pot on the stove, remember the time I burned my fingers, and reach for the pot-holder; or I meet a person whose plausible story has a certain appeal, until I compare it with similar plausible stories that proved false; or I see danger in the stiff way a man leans against the bus station wall, comparing this posture with others I have known. We all call on experience in this way.

Language itself works by much the same process, but in a more complex and refined way, as gesture after gesture is observed in one social context or another, then imitated and perhaps transformed. In the process we develop a repertoire of moves and a sense of appropriateness to occasion, which is what we mean by linguistic competence. Not only linguistic but intellectual competence, for this is at bottom the way we think. Our law knows this well, for in it we always think of one thing in terms of another, of the new case in terms of past cases.

Reading expands immeasurably the kinds of memories upon which we can call to interpret our lives and give them shape: we can think of what we see a dean doing, for example, as he distributes power and seeks to retain

authority, in light of our reading of *King Lear*; or of a particularly fatuous fool in terms of Jane Austen's Mr. Collins; or of our experience of the pond and woods in terms of Thoreau's *Walden*; or of our own struggles with our language, as we try to use it, in terms of any other mind doing that well. Think how impoverished our minds would be if we had no access to these instances of meaning. I heard someone reading a poem by George Meredith on the radio the other day, in rural northern Michigan, and thought what a gift this might be to a child who heard it and had never heard anything like it, and then turned, perhaps to the public library, for more of the same, and found there a world awaiting her beyond imagining.

* * *

Norman Maclean, whom I knew at the University of Chicago, told me more than once that his motive in writing *Young Men and Fire* was to redeem those otherwise pointless and terrible deaths. If he could tell the story in a true way, he said, it would do that. I don't think he meant simply that the experience could then be used in a practical way to avoid a repetition of the disaster, but that the very telling of it would change its status and nature. It would now have meaning. This I think is the aim and effect of all good writing, from Thoreau to a Supreme Court opinion: to transform our experience by giving it meaning.

Thus I say: I write out of my experience, including my reading, to others who reflect on their experience and may find my reflections of value. I try to write from the center, and to the center, which is why I go into solitude to do it. I write to transform my own experience, as a way of giving meaning to life, in the hopes that others can put what I do to use in their lives as well.

I write not to change the world, but as friend to friend, to those of like mind. I have made many friends through my writing, including several in this room. Yet there is a value independent even of that, in the process of writing itself, in seeking to attune oneself at the center of one's mind and being to one's imagined reader. In a poem about his own verse-making, George Herbert listed all the things it was not: not a crown, or a lute, or a hawk; it is "no office, art, or news"; but it has value nonetheless, for: "it is that which while I use / I am with thee."¹¹

11. GEORGE HERBERT, *The Quiddity*, in *THE ENGLISH POEMS OF GEORGE HERBERT* 86 (C.A. Patrides ed., Dent & Sons Ltd. 1974).

NOTES
