

**ARTFUL  
COMPOSITIONS,  
CORDER'S "LAWS  
OF COMPOSITION,"  
AND THE WEEKLY  
LETTER: TWO  
APPROACHES TO  
TEACHING  
INVENTION AND  
ARRANGEMENT IN  
FRESHMAN ENGLISH**

**Today's question is not  
Whether there is life after death  
But whether there is life after birth.**

**Albert Szent-Gyorgyi**

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**BOB FRYE**

Invention and arrangement are not the only rhetorical concerns of a writer, but clearly they are fundamental ones. Aristotle spends

two-thirds of his *Rhetoric* on invention before turning to arrangement in his last section of that work. Hence it is not surprising that Gary Tate's important compilation *Teaching Composition: Twelve Bibliographical Essays* (1987) opens with Richard Young's "Recent Developments in Rhetorical Invention" followed immediately by Richard Larson's essay on "Structure and Form in Non-narrative Prose."<sup>1</sup> In addition, there have been numerous essays describing the uses of computers for teaching invention, such as Raymond and Dawn Rodrigues's article in *College Composition and Communications* entitled "Computer-Based Invention: Its Place and Potential."<sup>2</sup> Yet I have learned through attending computer workshops conducted by Professors Hugh Burns and Helen Schwartz that computer-based programs stimulating invention frequently focus attention on structure as well. For example, while Professor Schwartz's SEEN program stimulates the discovery of ideas for writing about literary characters, it provides as well a useful structure for character analysis. Moreover, in the revised form of SEEN focusing on categorizing of works of art, this blending of invention and structure is even more apparent. In short, invention and structure not only are principal concerns of a writer but they also tend to complement one another, to blend and blur into each other, or, as Jim Corder has written, a structure may itself provide "another entry in the inventive world" ("What I Learned" 334).

It is Corder's Braddock Award-winning essay "What I Learned at School" that has especially helped me to learn about the complementary relationship between invention and structure. Corder writes: "Invention is an invitation to openness. . . . But structure is a closure. . . . Invention and structure. . . . represent a way of being in the world. . . . Invention precedes, structure follows, but invention does not cease thereby" (334).<sup>3</sup> Pondering Corder's ideas, I have discovered two ways, in particular, to help students understand what Corder calls some "laws of composition." In the first I employ the shared symbols of myth, painting, and poetry to demonstrate how Ovid, Pieter Bruegel, and W.H. Auden treat the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, thereby illustrating how "invention precedes, structure follows, but invention does not cease thereby." In a second way I utilize weekly letters to assist students, including myself, in discovering ideas for discourse in a traditional structure, the personal letter. These two ways of teaching how

invention and arrangement complement each other may help us move toward that quality of mind, that “habit of being,” so evident in the personal letters of Flannery O’Connor. They may help us learn how better to give shape and order to our lives, how better to speak ourselves into being.

To introduce the class exercise utilizing the myth of Daedalus and Icarus to suggest some relationships between invention and structure, I first provide the students a copy of Jim Corder’s essay “What I Learned at School.” We discuss, in particular, the “laws of composition” section, noting Corder’s words: “Invention invites you to be open to a creation filled with copious wonders, trivialities, sorrows, and amazements. Structure requires that you close. You are asked to be open and always closing” (334). Then I focus the students’ attention on the myth of Daedalus and Icarus revealing their extraordinary escape from Crete, pointing out that Daedalus is peculiarly suited to show how invention and arrangement interact since he himself was both inventor and architect, discoverer and arranger.<sup>4</sup> Then by proceeding to examine how Ovid, Bruegel, and Auden respond to the invitation of invention, how they open and close as they employ the mythological tale, I am able to offer some insights into the connections between invention and arrangement.

In Ovid’s account, as Mary Innes translates it in *The Metamorphoses*, Daedalus “set his mind to science never explored before.” Fastening feathers and thread and wax, he “arranged them in this way . . . to look like real birds’ wings. . . . When Daedalus had put the finishing touches to his invention,” he and Icarus, his son, flew away from Crete toward Sicily. Ovid describes how a fisherman, a shepherd, and a plowman saw the father and son fly past and “stood stock still in astonishment, believing that these creatures who could fly through the air must be gods” (184-185). Ovid’s rhetorical choices emphasize awe and wonder, enabling the reader to share in the astonishment.

Hundreds of years later the Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel (1525-69) imaginatively opens himself up to the possibilities in the Ovid narrative but closes down in a structure with a quite different emphasis from the awe-struck wonder of Ovid’s three main characters. In Bruegel’s composition *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, the fisherman, the shepherd, and the plowman seem completely indifferent to the dying Icarus who plummets into the sea

off to the far right side of the canvas. As Gilbert Highet observes, Bruegel has provided “a satirical depiction of the Fall of Icarus,” focusing attention on cold indifference, on man’s inhumanity to man (39).

Some four hundred years later, during a sojourn in Brussels in the winter of 1938, W.H. Auden examined there in a special alcove in the Musée Royaux des Beaux-Arts a copy of Pieter Bruegel’s “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” (Kinney 529). Auden generalized inventively on this Bruegel conception, examined other of this artist’s works hanging there, and then closed in a different structure, in a poem, supporting this conclusion: “About suffering they were never wrong,/ The Old Masters . . .” (“Musée des Beaux Arts” 146). In short, imaginative employment of the art of rhetoric coupled with the languages of myth, of painting, and of poetry may bring order and insight into our world of uncertainties, if only for a little while.

What students of writing may be able to see from this exercise is that, as Corder argues, “the structure we make today may give grace to tomorrow’s invention. That means if today we fail to be wise and generous and good, tomorrow we may succeed, and if not, we may fail at a higher level” (“What I Learned” 334). Ovid’s rhetorical choice seems to stress the extraordinary nature of the event witnessed by three ordinary but amazed folk. Yet Bruegel opens himself up to a quite different angle of vision, stressing the failure not of the attempted extraordinary achievement but of human love and compassion and concern. The shepherd, plowman, and fisherman fail at a low level. Auden deepens this somber tone, enlarging his circle of invention by discovering additional ideas in still other paintings by Bruegel such as *The Massacre of the Innocents* and *The Numbering at Bethlehem* for yet other images in his solemn poem. And if the writing teacher is not careful, soon the students are not only becoming aware of some ways that different artists in different compositions invent and arrange, but the writing students may also open themselves up—to learning more about Daedalus in particular and mythology in general, to discovering that Daedalus was inventive and imaginative but also deceitful and murderous, to learning that Bruegel’s genre paintings often subsume religious figures in homely, realistic scenes suggesting the interrelatedness of all human events (Bluestone 332), to learning what Arthur Kinney calls “the genetic process of a

poem . . . how the sudden sight of two great canvases, coupled with a copy of a third, has led to one of the more popular of Auden's shorter poems" (530). These students may want to discover how yet other artists—Mitch Holt, Joseph Langland, Vassar Milton, James Joyce, William Carlos Williams—have opened themselves up to the Icarus myth and what rhetorical structures they have chosen (Bens and Baugh 166, 176-72, 175, 193). In short, this exercise in rhetoric offers us as teachers an excellent opportunity to fail at a very high level.

The other aid to invention and arrangement with which I have had some success is the weekly personal letter. For the past decade I have written a personal letter to my honors composition class each week and each of the twenty students has written me a personal letter weekly. No subjects for the ungraded letters are assigned, no length is specified; but we try to write something every week worth each other's time and energy. After reading over 4300 of their letters and composing some 220 of my own for them, I have discovered some uses of the personal letter in teaching composition. Here I want to focus particularly on how this weekly activity, utilizing a familiar, non-threatening structure—the personal letter—may provide an aid to invention, an appropriate occasion to write, what Corder calls a "genuine need that must be genuinely answered" ("What I Learned" 331).<sup>5</sup>

To select the illustrations from the personal letters that follow, I chose a representative period, the 1982-83 academic year, and reread from that year all 460 students letters—the stack measures two-and-one-fourth inches thick on my wife's sewing tape—and I reexamined the twenty-three letters I had written during that time. Please understand that I am quoting our letters without emendations or revisions so that it will not be hard to find some faults in them. But I believe it important for you to see them just as we wrote in order that you may judge the value of such letters in aiding students to learn, through the conventional structure of the letter, more about invention.

The student's first letter to me typically is autobiographical, a letter of introduction. Karen writes: "Well, now let me tell you a little about myself. . . I enjoy little children, dancing, and being with friends. However, I also cherish moments alone when I can get to know myself better. No, I don't know myself completely, but I try to meet new aspects of myself continually. . . .

I guess I've written enough to introduce myself (at least the self I know). . . ." William Irmischer's essay "Writing as a Way of Learning and Developing," William Coles' focus in *The Plural I* on "ways of seeing one's self," on the "someone else," Erika Lindemann's section on "writing as knowing" in *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*—all leap to mind upon reading Karen's first letter, providing appropriate, and natural, topics for a writing class, thereby aiding invention (Coles 238; Lindemann 6-7).

Other first student letters seem less generative but are revealing. Two students write their first letters to me clearly out of genuine need. Rachal uses the recent death of her father's Texas ranching partner as the occasion for her first letter, concluding: "It would take days to tell about everything Truman has done or to express what he has meant to me, but I just wanted to put something down." Louise writes out of a real rage at the impersonality of the recent funeral service for her stabbed boy friend: "The priest rattled it off as if he were reciting ingredients for a chip dip. . . . Thank you for listening."

My own first letter in the fall term that year arose out of two real, genuine needs: (1) to share my joy at the upcoming completion of the Texas Christian University library expansion for which I had been waiting seventeen years and (2) to suggest the enabling, miraculous power of language. I explained that "to those of us who have hoped and dreamed and planned and wished for years for more library space, that new facility nearing completion is in the same category with burning bushes, parting seas, and Xerox commercials—it's a miracle." Then I suggested that it was no less a miracle for me to be able, just then, to pick up a piece of paper with squiggles on it describing the sounds I had made in a speech as Faculty Senate Chairman at the groundbreaking ceremony a year earlier and recapture the scene all over again. I quoted my three-minute speech, including this passage:

For me the Mary Coats Burnett Library is a place of miracles. I can come here and see Blake's illustrations of the Book of Job and witness Bruegel's provocative commentary on humankind's suffering and our indifference to it. I can come here and be uplifted by Howard Hanson's *Romantic Symphony* and go on immense journeys with Loren Eiseley. I can come here and consider Einstein's thoughts on the cosmos and hear N. Scott Momaday sing of the way to Rainy

Mountain. For here, captured out of space and time, life goes on, thinking is non-stop, growth is always possible. Here ideas live and move and have their being. . . .

But more importantly, as Chairman of the Faculty Senate, the representative body of over 300 faculty members, I want to assure you that we are grateful for yet another miracle—this event today wrought by generous individuals and couples and groups and foundations. Please know that when the library expansion dream is realized, you will have the TCU faculty's continual gratitude and appreciation for sharing with us your belief in the library as a place of miracles.

Yes, Mark Twain was right. With memory and the enabling capacity which language gives, I can call it all back, capture that marvelous occasion out of space and time, and make it as real as it ever was. See you in the miracle.

Jill finds my letter on the library expansion to be an occasion for her second letter: "I enjoyed your letter to us last week. After reading about the library, I was anxious to see it. I am now unable to study anywhere except at the library." As Corder says, "Invention precedes, structure follows, but invention does not cease thereby" ("What I Learned" 334). In fact, like Jill's my second letter was occasioned by what I had read in the first weekly letters. I addressed my letter to Rachal, author of one of the letters on death the first week:

Dear Rachal and all,

As I contemplated writing you this letter, somehow I could not get out of my mind those two letters from you last week. . . . Maybe you will allow me to be sad a little while, to be sorrowful for a time as I ruminate on how I felt when I read in the University of Tennessee alumni magazine that one of my teachers in graduate school had died.

Then after quoting the brief magazine notice of death of Dr. Richard Beale Davis, internationally known authority on early American literature, I described in my letter the notice's impact upon me:

I felt sick, as if the life had gone out of me. I told Alice the news, the surprise in my voice at once revealing disbelief and utter helplessness. Turning away, I slouched out the back door and toward the garden, a knife and sack in my hand,

my feet heavy, my shoulders sagging, my eyes fastened to the ground. Soon I was in the okra, but I didn't see okra. I was standing next to the tomatoes, but I didn't see tomatoes. I had darted back into time and it was Knoxville, 1962, a Poe and Hawthorne seminar with Dr. Richard Beale Davis.

We sat, the fourteen of us graduate students, in the main seminar room in the James D. Hoskins Library of the University of Tennessee. Then Professor Davis entered, carrying a book and a file folder. When he began speaking, I noticed immediately his genteel Southern accent. He said "ooht" for "out," for example, and he otherwise revealed his Virginia heritage. He was a big, imposing man, tall and heavy. And as he talked, he grew even larger. For his words were demanding, authoritative; he seemed a huge bear to me. He frightened me. He announced that we were to read the Old Manse Edition of Nathaniel Hawthorne—there are twenty-two volumes, I later discovered—and then he mentioned the other Hawthorne assignments. . .—and Dr. Davis hadn't even started talking about our Poe assignments yet. He frightened me.

There I was, in the okra and tomatoes, but I wasn't in the okra and tomatoes. I was standing outside Professor Richard Beale Davis's office. I had an 8:30 a.m. appointment. At 8:25 Dr. Davis arrived and, as he opened his door, I followed him in. "Our appointment is at 8:30, Mr. Frye," he said curtly. I waited, abashed.

I was standing in my garden, but I wasn't in my garden. I was listening to one of my classmates in the Henry James seminar with Dr. Davis. . . . I recalled my classmate Mrs. Fuller, who, driven by the Bear, had written such a good paper for his class that the *New England Quarterly* accepted it for publication. I remembered that the Bear expected us to read French criticism of Poe as well as English scholarship. And we did; we were afraid not to. And I recalled how much I had learned about Poe and Hawthorne and James, for I was afraid not to.

My mind jumped to the fall of 1979. I had intended to write Professor Richard Beale Davis and congratulate him on his National Book Award. But at the time I had imagined that he had received many letters of congratulations. So I



had waited, for I had wanted to write a long letter of thanks to this bear of a man, not a mere note of praise. But I never wrote it; now it was too late. I didn't like the man, but I had grown to love him. Now it was too late to write.

"Bobby, are you all right?" It was the voice of my wife, Alice.

"No problem," I said. I began cutting the okra. But the pain was written on my face, and Alice knew. She knew that I hadn't been in the garden at all.

In her third weekly letter Melissa writes: "I really liked your last letter because it showed you really cared and are able to share those emotions." Rachal adds: "I enjoy writing these letters to you every week because I can write freely about a subject which I like." Of course, not all of our letters were as somber in tone as Rachal's and Louise's and mine on death. Remembering our discussion of a Woody Allen essay on etymologies, Tad belatedly begins one letter: "Did you ever wonder where the word *procrastinate* comes from? Neither did I." And Lynn, having had considerable trouble with punctuation, opens one letter: "If a misused semi-colon fell in the forest, but there was no one there to hear it, would there be any sound?"

During the remainder of the year I wrote a variety of letters in which I attempted to complement our writing and reading assignments, focus attention on the connections between invention and arrangement, and illustrate how we may "find self-identify through language" ("Essentials of English" 185). For example, in letters eight and nine I composed definitions of music and of love to tie in with an earlier writing assignment and some questions it had raised. These letters enabled me, as well, to concentrate on definition as a way of invention and, with William Coles' help, to suggest that "the notion of definition as a way of seeing, as a description of the definer rather than the defined, while it can be revolutionary in its implications for a student, has such implications only if a student is given time to discover them for himself" (16). Weekly letters may provide the time and opportunity for such discovery.

The students' letters for the rest of the year, in conjunction with study of systematic procedures of invention in Ross Winterowd's *The Contemporary Writer* and encouraged in, for example, Annie Dillard's chapter in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* entitled

“Seeing,” enabled the students to gain a heightened awareness and begin thinking seriously about the writer’s world and themselves in it. Their weekly letters reveal this thinking. Teresa writes: “Annie Dillard followed me to religion class today.” Melissa remarks: “Since I have begun ‘seeing,’ or at least trying to, my mind goes off into all different directions and all different ideas. Now I see the same things I have always seen, but I regard them in a new light.” Melissa seems to have accomplished what Coles suggested as a worthwhile goal, illustrating Nobel Laureate Albert Szent-Gyorgyi’s observation: “Discovery consists in seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought.”<sup>6</sup> It may well be that weekly letter writing may help create the kind of environment which is conducive for such discovery.

Tamara’s fourteenth letter suggests that she has learned, as Richard Larson suggests, “to think of invention as much more than finding something to write or talk about. . .” Invention, argues Larson, is more than “only a heightening of observation; it can also be a way of using the intellect and imagination to heighten one’s understanding” (cited in Burt and Want xiii).

Tamara writes:

What am I supposed to do? I can’t even walk across campus any more without similes and metaphors popping into mind, the way grasshoppers spring up out of nowhere when you’re walking through grass in the spring . . . [and] without waking up in the middle of the night . . . with ideas suddenly ricocheting in my dull consciousness. . . . Figures of speech followed me to the snack-bar this morning. After French, I sat down at an empty table to relax while eating ‘Pina Colada’ frozen yogurt, and before I knew it I was writing on a scrap of paper about how my creamy white, pineapple and coconut-flavored yogurt had the same texture as snow when you pack it together into a snowball. Will I be doing this sort of thing for the rest of my life? Probably so.

For Tamara the process of writing itself has become an appropriate occasion of writing—several of her weekly ungraded letters during the year ran six pages single-spaced—and the bond established between student and teacher, enhanced by the exchange of ungraded letters, has helped her see writing as a way of living, as a habit of being.

Assisting students to see how invention and arrangement may complement each other by focusing, for example, on the various treatments of the Icarus myth while simultaneously practicing the blending of discovery and form in the weekly letters—these aids to invention and structure may, finally, encourage a habit of mind, a habit of being. In her Introduction to Flannery O'Connor's letters, Sally Fitzgerald alludes to a phrase in Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, "the habit of art," with *habit* being defined "not as a mere mechanical routine, but as an attitude or quality of mind. . . ." She then goes on to describe in O'Connor "a second distinguished habit, which I have called 'the habit of being': an excellence not only of action but of interior disposition and activity that increasingly reflected the object, the being, which specified it, and was itself reflected in what she did and said" (xvii). Although we know that thoughtless routine may trivialize us, that careless habit may demean us, William Gruber has shown that by "ritualizing our lives, we impose a saving human form on an otherwise shapeless and meaningless universe. That is what we strive to teach students when we teach composition: to impose some saving organization—a form—on the chaos of experience" (477). The personal letter, in particular, is one means of giving shape and form to ourselves. It may be a way to stimulate what Donald Murray calls "the habit of writing" ("Writing and Teaching" 3-4). It may help us—as teachers, as students—to speak ourselves into being.

There are, of course, risks in using personal letters to teach writing, a certain vulnerability being one. Like Murray's teaching by conferences, it is an "exposed kind of teaching" ("The Listening Eye" 14). Moreover, to see how invention and arrangement interact in other media—painting and music, for example—may require our learning much more about those media than we presently know. Yet I have noticed that those in our profession whose work I most admire continually admit their need to learn still more. Indeed, their need to learn becomes an occasion for their writing, and their admission of that need helps create that trust and belief which Carl Rogers, among others, suggests is necessary for genuine communication, for real teaching.<sup>7</sup> For example, the title of Corder's essay which I have employed here is "What I Learned at School"; on the first page of her book *Forming, Thinking, Writing: The Composing Imagination*, Ann Berthoff remarks: "I learned a lot in writing it"; and Edward Corbett,

in his essay comparing the rhetorics of John Locke and John Henry Newman, writes this final sentence: "We have much to learn from both men about the rhetoric of eliciting assent from listeners and from readers" (48). The aids to teaching invention and arrangement which I have suggested, including weekly letters from students, to students, and with students, may provide ways for us to learn along with them. If Albert Szent-Gyorgyi is right, if "today's question is not whether there is life after death but whether there is life after birth," perhaps the approaches I have described may help us all to learn, teachers and students alike, to enhance and enrich life after birth through the enabling discipline of rhetoric.<sup>8</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a helpful overview of recent work on invention, see Harrington et al, Hillocks, and, especially, Richard Young's "Recent Developments in Rhetorical Invention" in Tate 1-38.

<sup>2</sup>A most informative article is Burns and Culp.

<sup>3</sup>For the implications of this invention/structure relationship in considering the nature of argument, see Corder, "Argument as Emergence," particularly 29-30. For additional implications as evident in the third canon of classical rhetoric, style, see Smith, "Emerson and the Luminist Painters," 193-215, especially the section "Composition: The Open, Extended Format."

<sup>4</sup>On Daedalus as inventor and discoverer, see Graves 1:314, 339; on Daedalus as designer and arranger, see Graves 1:313, 339.

<sup>5</sup>For a more detailed description of my procedure and some other uses of this weekly writing with different illustrative letters, see Frye 94-110.

<sup>6</sup>Szent-Gyorgyi's emphasis on the importance of discovery is evident in the title of the festschrift presented him; see *Search and Discovery* and the inscription opposite the back of the title page. Ann Berthoff adds that "what you really learn is what you discover—and you learn to discover by questioning" (9).

<sup>7</sup>On the use of Rogers' communication theories in the writing classroom, see Hairston; on teaching as a fiducial relationship, see Ong 390.

<sup>8</sup>Szent-Gyorgyi is quoted in Arpad I. Csapo, "From Uterine Actomyosin to Parturition," in *Search and Discovery* 117.

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