

THE USES OF IMPERSONATION

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"He do the Police in Different Voices" was the working title of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. In that poem Eliot never impersonated any police, but he did write in a variety of dialects, from the low-life people in the pub ("When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—") to the fancier folk who converse in a room with a coffered ceiling and colored stone ("My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad"). The working title he took from Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, where the line is spoken by a poor widow named Betty Higden. She loves to hear her adopted boy, Sloppy, read the newspapers to her. "You mightn't think it," she says, "but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He do the police in different voices."

Impersonation assignments in composition are grounded on the assumption that just as skillful readers like Sloppy are able to draw upon their mastery of idiom, intonation, and rhythm as they orally interpret texts, so learning to write is enhanced by practice inscribing a range of voices. To be able to "inscribe a voice" means that one is able to simulate in writing the characteristic features of a distinctive manner of speaking. A person who can "impersonate in writing" (inscribe) many different voices is an accomplished stylist, for style in writing is largely a matter of giving voice to what is silent.

Of course written words have no "voice"—no idiom, no *meaning*—except as they are in some sense "spoken" or "heard." Thus, in a sense only partly metaphorical, learning to read and write fluently necessitates learning to *hear* the text one reads and to *speak* the text one writes. And since students need to move through varying social situations and encounter different sorts of knowledge and experience, since they have changing moods and purposes, they need to be able to hear and speak a wide range of voices as they read and compose.

Emphasis in impersonation assignments is placed on the inscribed self in writing, the *persona*. The inscribed self might also

be called the “silent voice”—that is, an implied speaking voice. This voice is not necessarily the written representation of the author’s real speaking voice, though it may well be. If so, the phrase “real speaking voice” must be qualified to mean the self-same voice of the author at a given moment, in a particular occasion for discourse. In this view, the “real voice” of each of us is not singular and static, but dynamic and variable. The utility of impersonation assignments is grounded on the possibility for enlarging the range of one’s voice.

The objection that conscious attention to the articulation of a variety of voices is sophistical and immoral can be met in the manner Aristotle answered the similar charge against rhetoric, *per se*: “Sophistical speaking is made so, not by the faculty, but by the moral purpose” (7). The art itself is neither moral nor immoral, since the province of morality pertains to the ends toward which actions are undertaken and has to do with the nature of persons. A person could use her skills to impersonate in writing to defraud; but the same power would be the one employed to do good. Hobbling the power to do evil would make the power to do good limp also.

Impersonation assignments ask students to create dramatically realized voices, some of them their own, some of them alien, to one degree or another. Such assignments might ask, for example, that students write using the voice of a well-known television character, or of an author or narrator in something they are reading, or of some locally-famous personage (the “Headless Norseman,” the pseudonymous author of a satirical column in the campus newspaper served quite well in one of my classes). Wayne Booth has students write a sequence of several papers, each embodying a different voice and attitude on the same subject, and each of which is written “with sincerity” in one of the student’s “own” voices (“Writing”). By the end of his unit on “image/self/ethos/character,” his students “have created six or eight voices of their own, some of them deliberately imitated from those in our reading (“LIT-COMP” 70).

The difficulty students will have with such assignments will depend upon their developmental and ability levels, the complexity of the models, and their familiarity with them. Written impersonations are probably beyond the competence of most lower-primary children and of older students whose writing skills are severely limited. Many college-aged writers who already write quite well

within a limited stylistic range may find them challenging. But the degree of difficulty can be reduced by choosing very familiar and easily impersonated styles as starting places, by de-emphasizing the importance of the finished product in evaluation, and by using such assignments to elicit writing that is in the expressive mode as much as it may also seek to inform, persuade, or entertain.

Impersonation assignments are hardly new. *Prosopopoeia*, translatable as “impersonation,” is one of the exercises in the *Progymnasmata* of Aphthonius, who taught in Antioch around the turn of the fifth century A.D. (Clark 278). Such exercises were intended to teach “young school boys” the elements of writing and speaking, and they were widely used in the Greek East and also, via Latin translations, in the Roman West, and quite extensively, down through the medieval period (Clark 252).¹

The durability and ubiquity of impersonation as a pedagogical strategy are arguments in its favor. It may be even more useful in our own times, where it can be adjusted to the cultural, epistemological, and noetic mandates of what Ong calls “secondary orality.” The same exercises, moreover, are not the “same,” but are much more powerful when both men and women are being educated, when they are allowed to freely invent and express their own ideas and feelings, and when they can compose in their mother tongue—“where language has its deepest psychic roots” and oral resonance—rather than in a language of instruction such as Learned Latin (Ong, *Orality* 113).

I will discuss four main uses of impersonation: as an invention strategy, as a way of increasing stylistic fluency, as a way of problematizing the self and of raising ethical questions, and as a tool for learning various subjects and improving students’ ability to read.

IMPERSONATION AS AN INVENTION STRATEGY

Impersonation is a scribal kind of role-*playing*. It is especially useful as a way into a topic, an invention device, a kind of heuristic game that can be played to create a poem or story or as a means of exploring a subject for an academic essay. Peter Elbow recommends several kinds of impersonations as “directed free writings.” Under “Prejudices,” for example, he says,

By taking a point of view as different as possible from your own, and really trying to enter into it as seriously as you

can, you will begin to notice your own unconscious assumptions as they begin to be violated. You do best of all, perhaps, if you take two or three different points of view—one of them your own “objective” view—and write an argument among them. (63)²

James Moffett recommends that impersonation assignments (though he does not use that term) first be enacted orally (50-51). Talking before writing is a valuable heuristic because while both speech and composing arise out of the matrix of inner speech, talk is prior and much more common in the individual’s performative repertoire, and is correspondingly richer, fuller, and easier to produce (Radcliffe 191).

While composing a parody or impersonation, if things are going well, the writer is “not at home,” and she “disappears into the act itself” (Mandel 373). Used in this way, impersonation becomes a method of “getting with” an idea, an attitude, a tone—a way of side-stepping mental roadblocks through a procedure that may be tantamount to inducing an “altered state of consciousness,” the celebrated ideal of which may be the white-heat of artistic creation or the sudden illumination of scientific insight.

Impersonation assignments run the risk of calling forth “writer-based” prose, full of idiomatic constructions which may be quite foreign to readers and so may confuse or annoy them. An impersonation sequence, consequently, may ask for successive versions of the “same” paper, the first version in the “ordinary voice” of the writer, her “street voice.” She need not deliberately attend to audience at all, and may not be required to show the paper to the teacher or anyone else. Later, she might be asked to rewrite the same paper in a different voice—the voice of the “bright young collegian.” This paper may turn out to be more “reader-based”—that is, it might be more suitable for an audience of teacher and class, or the generalized reading public.

Asking speakers of a minority dialect to impersonate a standard dialect voice may well be less psychologically burdensome than asking for revisions from non-standard vernacular scripts so as to conform to the conventions of the grapholect and the expectations of certain audiences. The instruction to impersonate allows the production of the standard dialect to become a game rather than an exercise in trying to “measure up,” to conform, with the attendant implication that the dialect features are inferior.

Ultimately, such instruction might lead students towards an understanding of the relativity of dialect and style.

In the hypothetical case described, the prose might change style from one version to the next. Such changes might occur whether or not the assignments were given in a sequence emphasizing voice, on the one hand, or audience on the other. However, it makes a difference which sequence is in effect. Undue or too-early emphasis on audience may conceivably disrupt invention and may encourage the feeling that conformity to convention and adaptation to the expectations of audience take precedence over self-expression, the development of a range of stylistic registers, and even the attention to the particular rigorous demands of a given subject or argument (Elbow 307).

IMPERSONATION TO ENCOURAGE STYLISTIC FLUENCY

Especially with younger and less experienced writers, impersonation assignments need to be accompanied by complementary activities, such as reading aloud, transcribing speech, rote copying, "creative imitation," parody, and exercises in scrutinizing, analyzing, and even counting the noticeable features of different styles.

Reading your own and the works of others aloud is not only a way to become aware of the sensuous dimensions of diction, rhythm, tone, nuance. An attempt to breathe a voice into soundless text is also an act of interpretation. Translating "from print to voice" as a method of feeling and understanding is termed "epireading" by Denis Donoghue, "following the Greek *epos* which means speech or, utterance" (98). Eudora Welty describes her use of epireading and its importance to her as a writer:

Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't *hear*. . . . It is the voice of the story of the poem itself. The cadence, whatever it is that asks you to believe, the feeling that resides in the printed word, reaches me through the reader-voice. I have supposed, but never found out, that this is the case with all readers—and with all writers, to write as listeners. (11-12)

"Transcribing is not composing," explains James Moffett, "but

it gives valuable practice in rendering voice on paper and usually involves editing and summarizing" (51). Taking dictation from others or from their own recorded speech helps students become focally aware of the differences between what is spoken and what is written, and helps them consolidate their competencies in speech and make them available for the process of inscribing voices (that is, the simulation of speech in written scripts).

Rote copying is another ancient method that is useful even for mature, fluent writers. It is a way of fixing attention on the minutiae that constitute written text—letting the hand inform the brain about matters the tongue and eye might have missed. Corbett recommends this exercise in an article in which he also describes a method for raising stylistic consciousness by counting individual features of style. Walker Gibson's "Model T Style Machine" in *Tough, Sweet & Stuffy* and Joseph Williams' lessons in *Style* offer abundant instructions for carrying out such analytic investigations. Computerized "style machines" like *The Writer's Workbench*, as Kiefer and Smith explain, are also useful in teaching students about the nature and range of stylistic options.

Rote copying, "creative imitation," parodying, and full impersonation can help students *acquire*, as distinguished from *learn* (by rule or precept), stylistic awareness and fluency (Pringle). Rote copying can be another way of "getting with" the text, in manner similar to the way an actor interprets a role or a student in an oral culture "gets" a lesson—by saying it, by dwelling in it.³ "Creative imitation," "the most enduring form of pedagogy," involves a model text but asks that students "change content, but keep almost word-for-word as to sentence structure, figures of speech, sense of occasion" (Taylor). Such imitation is fun, helps reduce dread of the blank page, and necessitates close reading as well. Students are often exhilarated to hear how their ideas sound when they ring within the syntax of Joan Didion or Thoreau.

Full impersonations, unlike reading aloud, transcribing, stylistic analysis, and rewriting sentences in various ways, call for whole discourses, "instances of writing." These papers may be long or short, but always require the student to fully engage herself in the complexity of the composing process, as opposed to the partial engagement required in carrying out exercises. Some impersonation assignments are intrinsically more demanding than others, but instead of trying to clearly demarcate kinds of assignments according to their potential difficulty or ease, I will merely array

some different kinds in a very rough progression from the simpler to the more complex, bearing in mind that what is simple to one person may be complicated for another.

Creative imitations and parodies qualify as “instances of writing,” depending upon the degree of creative involvement in the task. Imitations can remain fettered to their models, or they can “take off” and become worthy creations in their own right.

It may well be easier to impersonate several voices, as in dialogue, than to sustain a single voice throughout a paper. Since learning to talk (and most of our talking) is social and since sustained interior or exterior monologue develops relatively late, most of us may be better prepared to carry forward a discourse composed of several voices interacting, rather than a single voice probing forward in an argumentative speech or essay.

As students rewrite papers originally done in several voices into a single voice, they may be moving from a dramatic to a logical or argumentative pattern of arrangement. A sequence asking the student to write first talk, then write in her own most familiar voice, and finally to revise such discourses into the voice of the academician (a voice that may be defined, anatomized, modeled, and even personified), also moves in such a direction.

Accomplished stylists may wish to use “polyphony”—that is, several different voices within the same text, all of which may personify some attitude or give some different perspective to the thesis under discussion. Polyphonic essays differ from dialogues in that the voices do not interact, though one might easily conceive of hybrid forms in which they do.

Beyond polyphony there is polyglottism—writing or speaking in more than one language. Though I am not prepared to give detailed advice on how students may make use of their command of different languages to increase stylistic fluency and greater control over the composing process, I believe that such competencies have great value and should be exploited to advantage, especially in an era when we can expect increasing numbers of bi- or multilingual students.

IMPERSONATION TO RAISE ETHICAL CONCERNS

Denis Donoghue has said that “communion” is the goal of conversation. Style in writing may be defined as a kind of compensation for the inevitable failure of written words to effect the

mysterious union sometimes felt in talking face-to-face, a communion perhaps “in, with, and under” the words, but not of the words themselves (46). In *Persona*, a book which emphasizes voice and the need to create the inscribed self, Walker Gibson seems to envision the same goal:

There is something inherently hypocritical in all verbal behavior, in the sense that we are all actors on the stage of the world. Yet to retreat into silence, while it may be honest, is strictly inhuman. Rather, let us play our roles as cheerfully as may be, conscious that they are all we have to offer one another in any search for communion. (xii)

Gibson’s conviction that the self in writing is always a *persona* is rejected by some of my students, who resolutely affirm that even though the self in each of their writings may vary from paper to paper, from subject to subject, audience to audience, year to year—still they themselves are actually present in every paper they write. And they would prefer to write “simply, straightforwardly, and honestly,” expressing their own opinions in their own unique voice.

I agree with them that there is something unique about each person’s voice in writing. Indeed, there appears to be something detectable, countable, and even imitable by a computer program like *Travesty*.⁴ To say this much commits me to a view of style as person and to talk of “having” a voice. But while each of us “has” a certain stylistic signature, we can also work “in” a wide variety of voices. None of our written voices is unrehearsed, inevitable, or utterly “natural.” And since as we increase our stylistic fluency, it becomes increasingly clear that in a sense all our signatures are forgeries (and all of the cleverest forgeries betray our authorship) (Gage). Hence Faulkner is always Faulkner, even though he successively forges different voices in early, middle, and late career and writes in the varied dialects of different characters all along.

So the question arises that if the self in writing is in some sense a “single, separate person,” how can it also be a multitude? Is every adjustment of our voice in writing a kind of sophistry in the worst sense? John Gage suggests that we can “have it both ways” on this issue: “What we discover as we write is both a ‘true self’ and a self adapted to a rhetorical situation comprising other selves” (621).

I do not try so much to persuade students to this point of view on the nature of the self in writing so much as I try to problematize this complex issue. The discussions that follow readings in *Persona* and essays by E.B. White, Joan Didion, and others are not as important in this process as their private discoveries as they write in one voice, then rewrite in another, or as they impersonate the voice of an imagined character, and then reflect on, read aloud, and discuss these papers in workshops.

The questions that these activities generate include: What is my authentic voice? Is it single and consistent or multiple and variable? Can it change from text to text and still be distinctively *mine*? Is the voice I write the same voice that I speak? Such rhetorical questions have moral dimensions: Is it ethical to change my voice to meet with the expectations of specific audiences and demands of certain subjects? Questions of this sort arise naturally as the class writes and responds to impersonation papers. Booth has described this process well:

When [students] . . . discover that every piece of writing in a sense makes a “character” who is almost always an improvement over the spontaneous, undoctored person who wrote it, they suddenly fear hypocrisy It occurs to them that the more skillful we become in inventing voices not genuinely our own, the more dangerous we are. Some of our best discussions and papers come as students explore the ways their present ‘selves’ have been constituted by the roles they have ‘tried on’ in the past, and as they ask where hypocrisy leaves off and honest growth begins. (“LITCOMP” 69)

I suspect that a ready or a “definitive” answer to these kinds of questions is also a dogmatic answer, and that these concerns are finally better encountered and explored than assaulted and settled. But they should not be avoided or ignored. Not to problematize the issue of voice in the writing class may be to risk leaving the impression that such matters as ethos, image, and tone are handled well enough indirectly through attention to audience. But over-emphasis on audience may have “clear ethical consequences,” as Ede and Lunsford point out: “Much of our difficulty with the language of advertising, for example, arises out of the ad writer’s powerful concept of audience as addressed divorced from a corollary ethical concept” (159).

In a class that emphasizes the need to create and modulate a voice, as well as the need to “invent and analyze” an audience, students are prepared to discover the importance of ethos in the creation of meaning. They are likely to have the insight that *who* a person seems to be in writing is part and parcel of the message and has important ethical consequences as well.

IMPERSONATION AS A TOOL FOR LEARNING

Learning to *do* the voices that we read—to give them breath, to enact them, to dwell within them—is of great usefulness for learning about more than style. In literature classes the benefits of having students write in the manner of the varied and unusual voices they encounter adds dimensions that no amount of lecture or discussion could contribute. But attempting to hear and inscribe different voices has direct utility in courses of all sorts.

In anthropology, sociology, history and others, impersonation writing assignments can be used as means for engaging or immersing the student in the subject under study. Anthropology students may write, for example, as if they were members of the culture they are trying to understand. History students may write from the point of view of a specified person who was involved in or witness to a given historical event.

In Luther College’s *Paideia*, a combined history/English/rhetoric course, we have used many impersonation assignments, partly for their value in learning to compose and partly for the enactive learning of course content that they engender. After reading *The Prince* and *Julius Caesar*, for example, students have composed evaluations of the political acumen of Shakespeare’s noble Romans from the point of view of Machiavelli. After reading *The Inferno*, they have assumed the tongue of Dante and condemned notable historical personages to their proper levels in Hell.

In some of the more quantitative courses and “harder” sciences, such direct uses of impersonation are harder to imagine; however, there are also benefits to be reaped in these courses from paying careful attention to the dynamics of voice, ethos, and point of view. The voice in many scientific textbooks, articles, and even lectures is quite alien and hard to understand for many students. This holds true for the voice of a great part of our *non-scientific* academic, bureaucratic, and commercial discourse as well.

The problem is not merely with the impersonal, toneless sound—the “voicelessness” of these voices. The voiceless style embodies a mode of thought quite different from that embodied in more familiar dialects. It is heavily propositional and abstract, a logos-centered dialect, in which the ethos of the author is consciously de-particularized and conventionalized. Yet it is a kind of voice, after all, and one that most of our students want to master to some degree.⁵

Approaching the voiceless style as a voice after all, and one that may be impersonated, may well be a way into many scientific subjects. To supplement the study of scientific writings with impersonations of scientific writing, done in the spirit of play and exploration, is a way of learning predicated on the assumption that to a certain extent, “we are what we pretend to be.” Pretending to be a *scientist writing* is a step towards becoming a scientist (or any other kind of academic or professional person). Playing the role well requires more than stylistic fluency, to be sure; but fluency in the “voice” of a discipline cannot truly evolve without considerable knowledge of that discipline.

Everyone must impersonate the role she is to become, and when we have managed successful impersonations, we are identified with the role. Thus, as Elaine Maimon points out, “The best scientific writers are the best actors; they understand the complexities of the scientific role” (114). They have learned how to speak and write in the dispassionate voice of the lab report, probably more by *doing* the voice than by conscious study of its attributes.

Using a particularized point of view, an articulated voice of a certain sort, is like shining a flashlight along a dark path. What we see in the circle of light is bright enough, but the illumination makes the surrounding darkness seem darker than before. The fixed point of view thus has the virtue of intensity, but a limitation of scope. What is revealed at the same time conceals what is outside the lighted circle. The gradual realization that all “objective, impersonal, sincere” accounts are similarly selective, contingent, and perspectively biased is a step towards wisdom and control over the medium. To exploit the power of writing, or any other technology that enhances our understanding, requires us to be aware of the constitutive limitations of all technologies: that they blind at the same time they illuminate.

Such blindness is ameliorated not by seeking to become independent of technological aids, but by multiplying perspectives:

using multiple instruments, each supplementing or compensating for the deficiencies of another. The impersonation strategy similarly seeks to encourage students to experiment with multiple points of view—eschewing the goal of teaching them how to be “disinterested” and to write “objectively.”

This strategy can help students to discover that insights may be achieved by passionate, imaginative engagement as well as by dispassionate reflection; that understanding is not always achieved by distance or removal from the scene of conflict, but by multiple imaginative projections into the scene as well. To understand, for example, why some people object to sexism in the Bible, we may need to try reading the Bible as a woman; and we must know that reading as a woman is something different from simply being a woman reading the Bible (Culler 43-64). *Reading as is to the art of reading what impersonation is to the art of writing.*

Instruction in writing that makes use of impersonation should also include careful attention to the concept of audience and regular opportunities for audience feedback of various kinds. But attention to audience is misplaced if it supplants explicit emphasis on the writer’s need to *create* a voice: for the person who moves and changes is not and cannot be identical with the *persona*, the voice inscribed in the soundless fixity of the text. Impersonation assignments can help students explore the relation between the self that writes and the self in writing. They can help them learn how to use a range of voices that speak creditably for the person who invented and deployed them.

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NOTES

¹For the text of some of these ancient assignments see Nadeau. Among the contemporary rhetoricians who make extensive use of or advocate emphasis on voice and impersonation, in addition to Booth and Elbow, special mention should be made of Walker Gibson, William Coles, Richard Lanham, Walter Ong, James Moffett, and Patricia Taylor.

²Elbow’s use of “dialogues” is also an instance of the impersonation technique: “If you discover that instead of having one clear prejudice you have two or three conflicting feelings, you are in a perfect position to write a dialogue. Give each of the feelings a voice and start them talking to each other” (66).

³Ong says, "In a primary oral culture, education consists in identification, participation, getting into the act, feeling affinity with a culture's heroes, getting 'with it'—not in analysis at all" ("Literacy" 4).

⁴With the computer program *Travesty*, "English letter—combination frequencies can be used to generate random text that mimics the frequencies found in a sample. Though nonsensical, these pseudo texts have a haunting plausibility, preserving as they do many recognizable mannerisms of the texts from which they are derived" (Kenner and O'Rourke, 129).

⁵On the distinctiveness of textbook prose see Olson.

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