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## Reading Coles Reading Themes: Epideictic Rhetoric and the Teaching of Writing

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Epideictic rhetoric reifies and reshapes the shared values of a community, and in this article, I reread William E. Coles Jr.'s *The Plural I* as showing forth a classroom built upon epideictic rhetoric, his own epideictic pedagogy asking that teachers of writing engage student work not expecting to be persuaded but as observers of rhetorical display.

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*The average freshman in college, quite understandably, wants badly to know who he is supposed to be in relation to what he thinks is wanted of him.*

*It is to be expected then, that in the midst of the threatening unfamiliarity of his freshman year, the student will shape whatever he can of his academic environment into patterns that he is familiar with.*

William E. Coles Jr.

“Freshman Composition: The Circle of Unbelief”

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William E. Coles Jr.'s 1978 *The Plural I: The Teaching of Writing* is a strange book, seldom read and seldom cited. It began as a 297-page report, "English is a Foreign Language: A report on an experimental Freshman English course taught Fall semester, 1965-66, at Case Institute of Technology." Both the book and the report narrate a semester of Coles teaching Humanities 1, a required first-year composition course. The report seeks to determine whether Case should institute a writing curriculum based off the one Coles taught at Amherst from 1960 to 1965 under the direction of Theodore Baird (a). Coles knows his report will not "be read in its entirety

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by everyone," but he believes, nonetheless, that "everyone connected with that mysterious thing we refer to as the process of education at Case ought to have a copy of it" (b).

It took Coles some ten years to find a publisher for *The Plural I*.<sup>1</sup>

Coles calls it a "teacher's manual" (*Composing II* 2, 10), but *The Plural I* is an unusual one: pedagogical theory that relies on narrative while taking the form of a quasi-epistolary novel built around ninety-four pieces of student writing. The book received mixed reviews.<sup>2</sup> While Joseph Harris ("Plural"), Bruce Horner, and Geoffrey Sirc each offer careful readings of Coles's work, Jo Keroes says *The Plural I* "is rather like a rich cake that has fallen in the middle" (n. pag.), and Harris even admits the book "seems a little clunky and aggressive" ("Comment"). Horner notes that Coles's work (along with that of Coles's later colleague at the University of Pittsburgh David Bartholomae) has been "unusually liable to mixed, sometimes contradictory interpretations" (193). Coles is linked to "hard rhetoric" and "'manly' plain-spokenness" (Dillon 64, qtd. in Horner 193; see also Catano and Coles's "Comment" in response to him), yet also to the Expressivists who value the student-centered, therapeutic classroom where writers find and free the self (Berlin 771-73; see Horner [193-94] and Harris ["Plural" 162] for critiques of Berlin's reading of Coles). Horner suggests such competing readings come from Coles's "resistance . . . to ready commodification" (193). Coles pushes against the dominant traditions and pedagogies shaping composition and consequently is hard to read, hard to place, hard to value.

This sense of resistance is key to understanding Coles's teaching, and in what follows, I offer a portrait of a teacher, a classroom, and a pedagogy—an effort to recover, and find value in, a teacher on the margins of composition. Though his teaching does read as both “manly” and “expressivist,” problematic as those terms are, I claim Coles teaches first and foremost a course in practical criticism, a course in praise and blame, a course in—though he never uses the term—epideictic rhetoric. Coles's rhetoric of praise and blame transforms (or, at least, attempts to transform) a community of learners, and in response to Joseph Harris, who laments that composition “seldom revisit[s] student texts quoted by others” (“Using” 669), I revisit the writing of Coles's students to observe that transformation. Their writing shows forth a classroom built upon praise and blame, yes, but more so their work points to the importance of epideictic rhetoric for the teacher of writing. An epideictic pedagogy asks that composition acknowledge our posture toward student writing—how we read it, how we respond to it, how we value it, what we do with it—and it asks, too, that the focal point of a classroom no longer be persuasion but a showing forth both situated and cultivated within and against a community.

### **The Rhetoric of Showing Forth**

Walter H. Beale argues that the standard definitions of epideictic rhetoric are all “weak” (222–23). The epideictic cannot be defined by its style, he says, since not all epideictic rhetoric is marked by “grandiloquence” (222; see also J. Walker 8). Beale calls Aristotle's past, present, future model for the judicial, epideictic, and deliberative the “weakest of all” attempts to define the epideictic and notes that “succeeding theorists”—he points to Cicero and Quintilian—“found little use for it” (222–23). Aristotle, too, seems to think his own time-based schema a bit muddy, noting that orators draw on the past to argue about the future while in the present (1358b).<sup>3</sup> Defining the epideictic by genre is no better. Jeffrey Walker notes that classical rhetoric often refers to the rhetorics of the courtroom and senate as “pragmatic” since they bring about tangible change: raising taxes, going to war, convicting or acquitting defendants, and so on. (In this article, I use *pragmatic* in this classical rhetorical sense.) Because the epideictic does none of this, it is grouped with the literary, and Walker argues this generic division fails to account for all the other discursive functions of the epideictic (7–8; see also Beale).

So I turn to the etymological definition of the epideictic: *epi-deixis*, the rhetoric of showing forth, of display, of demonstration, of making known, of shining.<sup>4</sup> And what the epideictic shows forth is the shared values of a community. These are the values the epideictic upholds, the foundation from which a rhetor can praise and blame. Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard asserts that epideictic rhetoric “confirm[s] and promote[s] adherence to the commonly held values of a community with the goal of sustaining that community,” concluding that “epideictic rhetoric can be seen as both beginning and ending in agreement” (766; see also Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 65). That is, it draws upon shared values, values it then affirms.

But this definition, too, is fraught. Showing forth can lead to the denigration of the epideictic in (at least) three ways. First, content can suffer as style takes over. Walter Jost explains: “Since the audience already identifies with many or most of the virtues and vices praised or blamed by the rhetor, greater attention can be given to the artifice with which the orator or writer achieves his aims. . . . But this same opportunity for self-display runs the risk of deliquescing into crass showmanship, false posing, hollow oracularity, empty verbiage” (148). Second, showing forth shared values can stifle inquiry. Walker notes that the epideictic can become a “deeply conservative, even oppressive social force” burdened by the weight of tradition, the rhetor “constrained in thought by compositional principles that lend themselves more to the copious stacking-up of equivalent phrases than to reasoned inquiry” (12). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca say the same, arguing that when the audience knows the conclusion in advance, they anticipate the argument, its progression, and its conclusion, such that “no freedom is left to the speaker,” the speech “trite and banal” (469). And third, when all discourse does is sustain previously held values, nothing comes of the discussion in the sense that nothing is produced, nothing is done. The epideictic pales in comparison to the decisions of the courtroom and the senate: “at the end of the speech there is no vote and no verdict is formally enacted, no legislation put into law, no policy adapted. The audience simply applauds, disperses, and goes home” (Walker 8). And so, when Lawrence J. Prelli notes that “epideictic ‘showing forth’ became rhetorical ‘showing off’ through stylistic ostentation and verbal self-display,” this is not to be unexpected, the epideictic devolving into little more than a rhetoric of empty display, crass showmanship, trite and banal discourse that precludes any sort of critical inquiry (2; see also Sheard 767; Rollins 7).

This disparaging view of the epideictic is not generous enough, and scholars know it. Michael Carter claims the epideictic can generate particular knowledge within a community, create a sense of that community, define that community, and establish a “paradigm” for being within that community. The purpose of epideictic rhetoric, he argues, is “to express who we are” (306–07). Walker takes a step further, arguing the epideictic “shapes the fundamental grounds, the ‘deep’ commitments and presuppositions, that will underlie and ultimately determine decision and debate in particular pragmatic forums” (9).<sup>5</sup> This is why Prelli can claim rhetorics of display are the “dominant rhetoric of our time” (2, 9). Prelli uses *dominant* here in reference to “ubiquitous” epideictic rhetoric, and I add that its dominance stems from the epideictic’s relationship to other forms of rhetoric, the epideictic foundational to the rhetorics of the courtroom and the senate, each crafting arguments dependent upon the shared values the epideictic shapes.

**Because the epideictic is a precursor to other rhetorical practice, it is necessarily pedagogical.**

Because the epideictic is a precursor to other rhetorical practice, it is necessarily pedagogical. Note the pedagogical overtone in Jost: the epideictic “can function philosophically, transforming criteria and reconvening a community, *clarifying what the community may not have known it knew*, or convening a new community *by virtue of what readers learn* about how they might come to order themselves” (151, emphasis added). Dale L. Sullivan says it this way: “Education is a form of epideictic rhetoric that relies on the rhetorical acts of praise and blame (1) to teach reasoning appropriate to professional and public practices and (2) to instill in the student sentiments or emotions considered appropriate within the orthodoxy which the teacher represents” (“Closer” 71; see also Carter). In this model, the teacher embodies those shared values and holds the standard against which student performance will be assessed.

This vision of the pedagogical epideictic relies upon an understanding of the classroom as one of uniformity, and here I turn to Coles. Coles is not the teacher as described by Sullivan, an “orthodox representative of a more or less monolithic culture” (“Closer” 82).<sup>6</sup> Far from it. His classroom is one of resistance that shows forth the potential of the epideictic to reshape shared values. Coles addresses the problems of trite and banal epideictic rhetoric head on: his teaching confronts flashy but substantively

weak writing, his assignments push students past hasty conclusions and toward sustained inquiry, and his discussions show that much is at stake in this classroom, even as he and his students do little more than praise and blame student writing.

Coles's pedagogy has him reading as an audience to epideictic rhetoric, which, as Walker notes, entails a fundamentally different way of engaging discourse. Looking to Aristotle, Walker writes that "the role of an epideictic audience is not to be a *kritês* [that is, a judge] but a *theôros*, that is, one who is to make 'observations' (*theôriai*) about what is praise-worthy, preferable, desirable or worthy of belief" (9). He clarifies: "The role of the *theôros*, in short, is not to make rulings but to form opinions about and in response to the discourse presented" (9, original emphasis). The task set before the audience changes. With the epideictic, the audience does not judge as they do in the courtroom or the senate; they do not expect to be persuaded; rather, the audience observes.

It is a big shift, I know, from classical conceptions of the epideictic to reading Coles's classroom as an epideictic space. But when Sirc writes of "Coles's intense desire to transform old forms and selves" (147), and when the Coles of my epigraph writes of a student's desire "to know who he is supposed to be in relation to what he thinks is wanted of him" ("Freshman" 138), they are both writing about the epideictic, the classroom challenging and reshaping shared values, the student searching for a place within a new community and its practices. I use the epideictic to read Coles not only to better understand his work but also to display the epideictic rhetoric within the writing classroom, a classroom ostensibly about argument but actually one that practices a different rhetoric. It is the rhetoric of praise and blame, and while some theorists push against those terms—Beale thinks *praise* and *blame* are too limiting to account for all that the epideictic does (222); Rosenfield prefers *acknowledgment* and *disparagement* (134)—I stay with them. Jost suggests the epideictic might "outrun praise or blame of settled values" and move on to other discursive acts (151), but I suggest it is through praise and blame that the epideictic realizes its rhetorical potential. In what remains of this article, I chart the trajectory of Coles's course and his use of praise and blame, the epideictic showing forth through (1) how Coles troubles his students' ideas about what makes good writing, (2) the development of a shared vocabulary for reading and valuing student work, and (3) the students' appropriation of Coles's way of reading. This

progression allows Coles to transform rather than merely reify the values of a community.

### **Challenging the Theme**

*The Plural I* revolves around a sequence of thirty writing assignments, with students writing an essay for each class meeting. There is no textbook; the course generates its own materials via its assignment sequence; student writing is the primary text of the class.<sup>7</sup> Each chapter covers one class period, presenting an assignment, two or three student essays mimeographed for class, and Coles's narrative of the ensuing discussion. Coles dramatizes the classroom conversation; he does not transcribe (*Plural I* 4). He says he made nothing up in his representation of the class: "I have rendered, not invented; selected rather than imagined" ("English" II). Because of this process of selection, the teacher in the book cannot be read as Coles himself. In a later essay appended to the book, Coles is critical of the "hero narrator" of *The Plural I*, calling the teacher a "persona," one he has since "outgrown," yet one that is "a good deal closer to me and a lot more important than a term like 'persona' can suggest" ("Looking Back" 272-73). There are plural Coleses in *The Plural I*, such that writing about the book quickly becomes difficult when trying to refer to "Coles" or "the teacher."

In Humanities 1, Coles is not looking for Themes, nor thesis statements, nor topic sentences. He is not looking for student writing to be Clear, Logical, or Coherent. On the second day of class, reading from his course description, Coles gives a few words on his teaching:

[T]hough I have never repeated an assignment, every assignment I have ever worked with, every question I have ever asked, involves the same issues: where and how with this problem do you locate yourself? To what extent and in what ways is that self definable in language? What is this self on the basis of the languages shaping it? What has it got to do with you?

I wish to make clear that the self I am speaking of here, and the one with which I am concerned in the classroom, is a literary self, a persona, the self construable from the way words fall on a page. (12)

The "self construable from the way words fall on a page" is integral to Coles's teaching. He clarifies that such a self is "not a mock or false self, but a stylistic self" (12).<sup>8</sup> The assignment sequence in *The Plural I* seeks to bring students to an awareness of how language constitutes this stylistic self and how one might use language in light of that awareness. The assignments ask

students to reflect on themselves as composers and users of language, as definers of key terms, as people who do something with language, whether they know it or not.

The course begins with a sequence on amateurism and professionalism. Assignment 1 opens with a quotation from Stanley Woodward—"A professional, whether paid or unpaid, is the man that counts. An amateur is a clumsy bastard"—and asks the students to explain "*what you understand to be meant by the terms 'professional' and 'amateur.' Do you respect one more than you do the other?*" (16, original emphasis). Coles assesses the students' first work of the semester:

Triumphs of self-obliteration the papers were, put-up jobs every one of them, and as much of a bore to read as they must have been to write. I found myself being talked to as though I were a rube ("Now it may, perhaps, be thought by my reader . . ."), unoffendable ("It has probably never been a matter of concern to the reader") or a confederate, someone in on the joke of why none of it mattered ("of course, we, in a college classroom, can hardly hope to settle the question of . . ."). No observation was too trivial to escape oratorical pronouncement ("It is unfair to call the amateur a 'clumsy bastard!'"); no moral stance too obvious to assume ("After all, professionals are not necessarily good people"). (18)

Coles calls the essays Themewriting written by Themewriters on a Themetopic, noting that at the beginning of a writing course, "students have a tendency to sound the way they think they ought to sound, the way they think English teachers want them to sound, the way they think they have been taught to sound" (17).

Coles anticipates Themewriting at the start of the term, but to call the papers "Triumphs of self-obliteration" is not fair. The students are practicing epideictic rhetoric. Coles has an awareness of this, as the above passage suggests: his students have assessed a rhetorical situation and in response call upon what they presume to be the shared values of this community, this classroom, and this teacher. In this sense, they show rhetorical savvy. Yes, the papers are put-up jobs, but so too they are tapping what Jeffrey Walker calls the "archival/ancestral" resources of the epideictic (12), a reservoir of commonplace arguments, of commonplace phrases, of commonplace ways of thinking about and addressing a topic. They write as the Coles of my epigraph describes, shoehorning the unfamiliar into the easy, comfortable patterns they know so well. They Themewrite essays in

service of, and practicing, the epideictic, their essays upholding particular values concerning writing.

Those values are evident in the first paper Coles and his students discuss:

The question of the amateur's place in a society of professionals is one that has greatly been changed by the scientific and cultural revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The amateur, who was formerly criticized as a bungling idiot, today has gained the status of a person who is capable of advancing by improvement of his own primitive institution, without the glorified educational and financial backgrounds which have made the professional man a symbol of intellectual and vocational superiority. Although the amateur may sometimes lack the spit and polish which distinguish the professional, it is somewhat irrational for him to be referred to as a "clumsy bastard." The amateur is definitely entitled to more respect than he is obviously receiving from such people as Stanley Woodward, who apparently does not realize the contributions which amateurs have made to society. (19–20)

The paper continues for five more paragraphs. After reading the full essay, Coles asks what the class thinks of it. One student remarks that the writer "proves his point pretty well here," to which Coles responds, "Yep . . . No Question. It's well-organized. It's Clear, Logical, and Coherent. It's neat" (21). Already, in Coles's capital letters, his suspicion of these shared values is evident. Coles asks who is speaking in the paper. The class doesn't understand. So Coles has a student read the final two sentences of the essay and then asks, "Look, how old do you think the writer of those two sentences is pretending to be?" The student is confused: "How old?" Coles tries again: "Well how big then? Do you think he's really the size of the Jolly Green Giant?" (21).<sup>9</sup> A student smiles, and Coles continues: "What would you say to Jim here, if he slid up to you in the snack bar and said: 'You know, Sam, the question of the amateur's place in a society of professionals is one that has been greatly changed by the scientific and cultural revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?'" (21). The students snicker, their laughter an acknowledgment that no one talks the way this paper sounds. When pressed by Coles, one of the students, Jim, cannot recall what point the paper is trying to make. The lack of memorability is not limited to that single paper: "I had the same trouble with the whole damned set," Coles says, "I couldn't tell one from another—particularly after about the fifteenth time I was handed talk like 'most professional athletes began their careers

as amateur athletes.’ As though I was being given the Hope Diamond” (22). The students resist. One asks, “But isn’t a writer entitled to his own opinion?” to which Coles thinks, “Smart and seasoned. They also knew the game,” game referring to the set of premade arguments in defense of the Theme, arguments the students deploy effortlessly (22). This is epideictic rhetoric at its worst, trite and banal discourse that precludes any critical inquiry, a crass showmanship of the student’s ability to Themewrite Clear, Logical, Coherent prose.

The students “continued to play it safe with what for years had not only gotten them by, but on,” unwilling to set aside the writing that has served them well in school, the writing they believe appropriate for this setting (26). After reading the essays in response to Assignment 3—another stack of Cop-Outs—Coles proposes a game: “Let’s play Themewriting” (36). He asks for three words. The students volunteer *man*, *black*, and *TNT*. Coles writes the three words on the board and asks a student to compose a Theme. One student offers: “The day that Man invented TNT was the blackest day in the history of humanity” (36). They do it again with *chicken*, *arm*, and *drugstore*: “Any drug store can arm itself against failure by selling chicken” (36–37). From those openings, the Theme writes itself, as it has been in the students’ papers. Coles paraphrases their ensuing discussion:

How does one proceed? Well, the opener, of course, set everything up. With the chicken sentence you’d go on to say that chicken was: one, delicious; two, nutritious; three, easy to prepare—devoting, say, a paragraph to each. With the sentence on TNT you’d talk first about peaceful uses of the explosive, in mining, railroading, etc., and then you’d turn to killing, particularly the killing of something called wimminchildren, then to destruction by remote control, and finally to man’s inability to you know what with something like this as a windup: “In spite of the many benefits which the invention . . . great achievements . . . control of the environment . . . master of the universe. . . BUT, when weighed against . . . hideous brutality . . . only conclude . . . not master of himself.” (37)

The ellipses here are Coles’s. They signify that there are certain destinations the Themewriter must reach, shared values like benefits, achievements, control, mastery. How the Themewriter arrives at each is inconsequential, hence the ellipses. The Themewriter then invokes a value shared with the audience, “something called wimminchildren,” the “something called” pointing to the flippant use, and abstraction of, “wimminchildren.” The

Themewriter is playing a game here, not engaged in serious writing. The final “windup” repeats the broad movements of benefits weighed against costs, with a well-placed “BUT” leading to the conclusion, a conclusion both inevitable—the writer can “only conclude”—and moralistic, as a Theme requires.<sup>10</sup>

Sirc reads the Themewriting game as Coles’s “attempt to rip the veil off of collegiate theme-writing for his students,” a moment where Coles “reveals the machinery behind the institutionalization of college composition” (160). Through the Themewriting game, Coles establishes what he understands as the starting point for any writing class. The students know the routines. They prize Clarity, Logic, Coherence. They want a writer to Prove his Point. It is the teacher’s job to call their bluff, to get in the way, to make them think about their performance as students. One student defends the Theme: “But it gets you by . . . you have to know how to do it” (37). Coles concedes that students do have to know Themewriting, but he presses on, undeterred. He has exposed the shared values students hold concerning what makes good writing, and now Coles works toward an alternative set of values, ones he won’t (perhaps can’t) articulate outright to his students. This is the drama of the book: finding a discourse richer, more critically and rhetorically malleable, than Themewriting, the epideictic at once reifying some values while resisting, even reforming, others.

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### **Building a Common Vocabulary**

The Themewriting game serves a second purpose, one that goes back to Coles’s course description: Humanities 1 is “a fresh progression in thought and expression, a gradual building up of a common vocabulary, a more precise definition of terms” (*Plural I* 12). Coles uses the Themewriting game to build that common vocabulary, working with his students to find precise terms to describe writing, the terms a fresh progression in thought and expression. These terms serve an epideictic function, uniting the class in their practice of praise and blame. In “The Teaching of Writing as Writing,” Coles speaks to this vocabulary building: “I mark the student papers not with standard correction symbols but with metaphors evolved from our

class discussions. After four or five examples, no student is in any doubt as to what is meant by such terms as ‘bulletproof,’ ‘cocoa-marsh,’ ‘sky writing,’ or ‘mayonnaise’” (112). John Hendrickson, responding to Coles, challenges the usefulness of such metaphors, arguing students would be “incapable of spelling ‘mayonnaise’ let alone understanding the metaphorical intent of the word as a corrective device” (403). Coles doubles down: “If as a class we come up with the metaphor of ‘mayonnaise’ as the correlative to a half-hour’s conversation about what the student has written, we have a great deal with which to make the term mean something, and we can use it from that point on in the course, together with other metaphors which we evolve as a community, with more than common understanding” (“Reply” 404–05). These shared critical terms, abstract as they are, do the community-building work of the epideictic.

And so, when writing his commentary on student papers two assignments later, Coles draws upon the Themewriting game and the critical terms it introduced: “Most of the papers addressed to Assignment 5 I could take care of with one variation or another of a standard comment: ‘Man. Black. TNT. Remember the game? What do you lose when you win it?’” (51). The students catch on to this community-fashioned language and the way of reading it represents, and they begin adding new terms to their critical vocabulary each class period.

For Assignment 5, Coles asks the students to “*describe a situation in which you acted as what you would call a professional*” (51, original emphasis). A student writes about playing pool with his friends:

The game started slowly as each person in turn missed, but as it continued there was suddenly a radical change. Abruptly, I declared that I would clear the table and I did. They watched in amazement, wondering if I knew what I was doing or whether I was just lucky. They challenged me to do it again. I accepted the challenge and was successful. The truth was that in my own home I have a full-size pool table and that I had been practicing extensively just before the trip. (52)

One student doubts it happened. “I play a lot of pool,” he says. “When you clear the table you run the rack. Anybody who played pool the way this guy says he does would know that. I don’t believe he wiped out those guys this way” (52). The classroom discussion turns to this question of *running the rack* versus *clearing the table*, of how a professional and amateur speak, of how the way each uses language reflects their relationship to their specialty.

*Run the rack* becomes a critical term, a shorthand representing the discussion of how language use creates a stylistic self. Two assignments later, *Steve* becomes another. He initially appears as a character giving advice in a paper written for Assignment 7. The class agrees that Steve is flat and unbelievable, a product of Themewriting. In his written comments to the batch of essays for Assignment 8, Coles resorts to *Steve*:

I'd read a Theme no further than was obvious that that was all the paper was going to amount to; at that point I'd draw a slash line, write "read to here" in the margin, and, at the end of the paper, following the appropriate title (Steve as Miss Lonelyhearts, Steve Saves Lab Partner from Electrocution, Steve for Coach of the Year), I addressed each writer directly. (78)

Discussing Assignment 8, Coles laments yet another character with "no center, [who] fails to suggest anything recognizably human," a character who "isn't a character at all" as she is composed solely of clichés (80). A student helps Coles out: "What you get is a Suzie for Steve" (80). In this comment, the student recognizes the problem Coles is describing and recalls the vocabulary used to name it. The student applies that to the current discussion, adding Steve's counterpart Suzie to the course lexicon.

But in Assignment 10, these terms and their quick appropriation create problems. Coles opens class with a paper he believes has great potential, "one of the best papers we'd had to work with so far that term, and one I particularly looked forward to doing with the class" (100). The assignment concerns giving good advice to yourself that you then took, and the student writes:

I had made up my mind not to join a fraternity before school even started. They just weren't me. All those parties and the pledging. I didn't have the time to devote to a fraternity. Why should I cheat them and myself? I wouldn't be one of the guys if I didn't join, but that was OK. I didn't care to be, I told myself. . . .

Every Monday I heard the reports of the previous weekend's capers:

"Wait until Paul's parents get back and see what that party did for the house."

"Gerry was really plowed, and hell, he had only three beers. I had six and man, I was riding nice and high."

"What a body that Sue has; she must be about a forty."

I didn't need to be in a fraternity; I could repeat the Monday dialogue myself; it's all the same—pretty dull, I told myself. (100–101)

The response to this paper was not what Coles had expected or wanted. A student remarks, “Well, here’s another goody-goody,” and mimicking Coles titles the paper “Steve gives up fraternities” (102). Though the student uses the class’s critical vocabulary, Coles is not pleased. His students have appropriated his language, his criticism, his snark, but they’ve employed it at the wrong time. It

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has become a knee-jerk reaction. The students do not, in fact, understand Coles’s way of reading. They can deploy the Jolly Green Giant, or Steve and Suzie, or Cop-Out, or Phony, or Run the Rack at ease, but they lack the acumen to use these terms well. They do not value the waffling in this paper, the way the writer dismisses fraternities while yearning to join one, the way the writer strings together three sentences with two semicolons, the patched syntax insisting that he does not—really, he assures us, he doesn’t—want to be in a fraternity, an insistence called into question by the very semicolons creating it.

Assignment 18 asks students to write a letter to a friend “*explaining to him just what it is you think you’ve been up to. Try to be helpful in preparing him for what you think he ought to know about writing when he gets here as a student*” (156, original emphasis). Coles was not impressed with what the class wrote—“Not many of the students’ letters would have needed a return address” (157)—but one paper signals a turning point in the course. The student writes, “I got a letter from Gwen a couple of weeks ago in which she said, ‘cause I love you loads’ and it annoyed me. And then I got annoyed that I got annoyed” (161). The student is annoyed because his girlfriend has Themewritten him a love letter. The student is annoyed, too, that he is starting to recognize Themewriting outside the classroom. His unsettling sense that getting away from the Theme might not be so easy after all comes at a cost: his relationship with Gwen. When Coles asks the class what this comment about Gwen’s letter suggests the writer has learned, one student responds, “Maybe that’s a warning that it’s not all a downhill ride” (162).

By the end of the course, this realization that the Theme is, perhaps, unavoidable stymies the students’ quick deployment of their critical vocabulary. Coles gives the following for Assignment 27:

*You are a student at an institute of technology. Although no major is offered by the humanities division of the institute, you are required to take certain humanities courses. Why is this, do you suppose? Is such a requirement desirable so far as you are concerned?*

*Before you make up your mind just how you are going to address this Assignment, consider carefully whether you are sure that you want to talk about A Balanced Education, or being The Well-Rounded Man in just these terms. (Have you ever wondered what happened to The Well-Rounded Man? What's he doing these days?) What sort of rhetoric is this, by the way: a balanced education? How far do you think it will take you with the problem of this Assignment?*

*Is there another way of talking? (230, original emphasis)*

The class “had little difficulty seeing that the problem of the Assignment involved avoiding the rhetoric of cant, but, to develop ‘another way of talking,’ turned out, as it always does, to be another thing again” (231). This is the problem of the entire course. With only a few assignments remaining, students are struggling to find that other way of talking, to avoid the canned Themetalk that produces The Well-Rounded Man.

Coles begins class with a paper full of clichés, unsure whether the writer uses them knowingly. He reads the paper aloud, and the first student to speak, Bill, “wasn’t quite sullen, but he was annoyed and he wanted me [Coles] to know it” (232). Bill’s frustration comes from his inability to do anything with the assignment. Bill says the writer wrote “The usual,” and, pressed by Coles, Bill elaborates: “I mean it’s the same damn thing I said. What the hell else could you say? This is a hooker assignment. . . . You knew right away what you’d be stupid to do, but you ended up doing it anyway” (232). Bill characterizes these assignments as baiting him, getting him hook, line, and sinker when he resorts—begrudgingly—to the Theme. Bill has come to an awareness of the problems with Themewriting, and he is aware, too, of how hard it is to avoid. And when he can’t avoid the rhetoric of cant, he gets mad.

The discussion of the second paper has a similar tenor. The students are slow to criticize it. The conversation is marked by hedges: “I’m not really sure that’s what he’s doing,” says one student; “Maybe he’s trying to . . .,” begins another; “You can’t really tell which he means. Maybe *that’s* his point . . .,” suggests a third (236, original emphasis). Absent is the quick dismissal of the paper as a Cop-Out or Phony, of the writer as Suzie or Steve or the Jolly Green Giant. The students realize the difficulty of Coles’s assignments, and there is a sense of community in the classroom, one brought about, in

part, by a shared vocabulary. The critical terms the class uses for praise and blame initially united the students in their giddy criticism of their peers' work; now, nearing the end of the course, the terms unite the students in their floundering, their confidence in the Theme shaken, their bravado to call writing Mayonnaise gone.

### **Trading Themewriting for Coleswriting**

On the last day of class, Coles reads six student papers aloud, sharing his thoughts on what works in each. The final one is by the writer of the first essay discussed in the term. He admits he is lost:

“Where do you seem to come out?” I am still mixed up by the assignments. For some reason, I have had a kind of faith that whenever we came to the end of this course everything would fall together, and it would be possible to turn and see the road by which I had come. We were told Monday that this is the end; so, I'm turning. At first all seems dark, but then I think I can recognize a little light. My main hope is that this light is the beginning of dawn and not just moonlight. (268)

This comes in the middle of a paper full of hedging, full of second-guessing, full of moments like the following: “I think I am coming close to saying something in this paper. I don't know whether ‘close’ is as far as I can get or whether I could go all the way and describe ‘close to knowing’; but ‘close to knowing’ is where I want to come out, where I think I am coming out, in this course” (269).

Coles values this kind of writing, praising how “the writer refuses to disown completely his first-day-of-class naiveté, the way he speaks of making a ‘partner’ of his confusion, his seeing that ‘readiness with’ a certain kind of language is the same thing as a ‘loss of words’” (270). Coles is drawn to a passage where the student analyzes his own word choice:

What has the course been all about—writing, learning, seeing, thinking, understanding? I looked at these words after writing them and wondered why I had written them in the -ing form. I could just as easily have said “how to write, learn,” etc.; but I didn't. I guess this would have made it sound as though I had definitely learned something; for instance, you can “learn” how to ride a bicycle. I haven't learned anything in this manner. I guess I would have to say that I have learned enough to automatically put these examples (writing, learning, etc.) in the -ing form rather than some other way. I have only begun to learn things. (268–69).

As Coles reads him, the student understands “his consciousness of the activity of writing as an action (‘the -ing form’) undivorceable from the actions of seeing, thinking, and learning” (270). The student has an understanding of how words represent actions in the world, and how the choice of using an infinitive or a gerund is not merely a choice of grammar but one of consequence where sentence craft betrays a stylistic self existing both on the page and within Coles’s curriculum. This has been the subject of the course, and this student gets it.

From the same paper, its final paragraph:

This is the path that we have taken to learn about writing. We were told at the beginning of the year that this set of assignments represented a “fresh progression in thought and expression.” I am sure that this is so, but I am equally sure that students who have taken this course in previous years have come out at approximately the same place I am now. They might not have had to struggle with help, advice, amateurs, and professionals; but whatever their “progression in thought and expression,” I am sure that through it they saw the complexity of writing, and that in writing they had a key that could open—at least part way—any door that it was set to. (269–70)

This student uses Coles’s own language from the syllabus (“fresh progression in thought and expression”) to press against him and the course, questioning how fresh this progression actually is. That all six papers of the final day express this same confusion, and that all six do so in a similar style of hedging and second-guessing, and that this

**This student uses Coles’s own language from the syllabus (“fresh progression in thought and expression”) to press against him and the course, questioning how fresh this progression actually is.**

student comes to the realization that he is not alone in feeling this way after a semester with Coles, suggest that the students have learned to cast aside the Theme and replace it with something else. They’ve exchanged Themewriting for Coleswriting. And this student knows it, recognizing that all Coles’s previous students have likely reached the same place he has—Coleswriters, all of them. They’ve learned, above all else, that they cannot write. One set of shared values has supplanted another: a triumph of epideictic rhetoric, yes, but one that is disconcerting.

## A Stylistic Response

It appears Humanities 1 has been a failure; the students finish the course defeated. But to read *The Plural I* like this misses the work of the epideictic in Coles's classroom. The epideictic, as practiced by Coles and his students through their acts of praise and blame, reshapes this community's values concerning good writing. Rather than reify what students already think concerning writing (that it must be Clear, Logical, and Coherent, that it must Prove its Point), the epideictic transforms how the students read, how they write, how they do school.

This transformation is facilitated by the trajectory of Coles's class. The course opens with a display, Coles showing forth the problem of Themewriting. The class bristles at this display, seeing their values come up against

**On the final day, there is more to be done. This is, I think, the great strength of Coles's teaching. Messy as it is, his classroom convenes and then transforms a community through showing forth, an epideictic project underway and nowhere near completion.**

Coles's, but then builds a working set of critical terms, these terms shaping and reshaping the class through their use in practical criticism. Students appropriate and add to these terms, navigating between Coles's way of thinking and their own. The intellectual, formative work of the course

is not at all tidy nor contained within the semester. On the final day, there is more to be done. This is, I think, the great strength of Coles's teaching. Messy as it is, his classroom convenes and then transforms a community through showing forth, an epideictic project underway and nowhere near completion.

As teachers of writing, then, we shouldn't feel ashamed to name what we do as epideictic rhetoric. When we claim that first-year writing is foundational to the other courses students will take during their college years, we are making an argument based upon epideictic rhetoric as foundational to all other rhetorical practice. The first-year classroom teaches the ways of thinking and being that the rest of the academy depends on. And though we don't use the term to describe what we do, more often than not we read student writing as epideictic rhetoric. We read like Coles. Coles does not read student work expecting to be persuaded, and if I am honest with myself, I admit, almost abashedly, that it is the rare occasion when I am persuaded by student writing. I'm not reading to be persuaded. Rather, I'm looking to how the argument is put together, to how the student interacts

with sources, to how the student works within and against convention, to what big questions the student tries to answer. I read student papers against the values, conventions, and practices of the academy, of my discipline, of a genre, of our classroom. These are not the criteria of pragmatic rhetoric but of the epideictic, the students' display set within, and assessed against, a particular community. This is an observer observing, a teacher teaching.

But to read as an observer—as audience to the epideictic—makes me uneasy. It seems ungenerous, dismissive of the work students accomplish in their writing. In the academy where we prize argument, to suggest that student work is not persuasive risks turning first-year writing into a series of hollow exercises, students Themewriting their way through English 101, “in on the joke why none of it matter[s]” (Coles, *Plural I* 18). And yet, to claim that student work enacts epideictic rhetoric (as it shows forth a set of shared values), is a product of epideictic rhetoric (as it negotiates various views concerning good writing), and is assessed as epideictic rhetoric (weighed against the conventions of a given community) better names what it is we do when we teach writing. Students do try to persuade in their writing, yes, but that persuasion, if it does occur, is a product of display—how well the student shows forth the various conventions of the discourses he or she hopes to enter. If the display is clumsy, persuasion can't and won't happen. As Victor Villanueva Jr. writes, “One has to know how to be heard if one is to be heard” (95). This is the rationale behind writing in the disciplines, where students practice the ways of thinking, reading, and writing within a branch of the academy, learning how to be heard within that community, the rhetoric of display making possible other rhetorical acts. Brooke Rollins warns that we ought not ascribe value to the epideictic only because it shapes future rhetorical acts (9), and I agree: we must remember, and I must remind myself, that display is rhetorical in and of itself, and mightily so.

So, what are readers to do with *The Plural I*, some fifty years after the teaching of Humanities 1? The trajectory of Coles's course shows forth how education can be transformative both of the self and of the community; it offers a case study of this messy, unfinished process. And though Coles is brash and abrasive at times, his reading practice uses praise and blame to facilitate that transformation, his students negotiating the conflicting values inherent in any classroom setting. This is the work of the epideictic. I realize such pedagogy can raise fears of indoctrination, but I return to how Coles's epideictic classroom is one of resistance. He uses the epideictic not

to teach his students to conform to but to break away from the Theme. So, too, today's first-year writing classroom might do the same when harnessing the formative, pedagogical, resistant potential of the epideictic. It would be a matter of first seeing what shared values of the community are troubling and then resisting them, rewriting them even, through praise and blame.

As for what this might look like in practice, Coles has a few words. He writes, "When it comes to the teaching of art, what teaches finally is style. Learning, the other end of the activity, would seem connected with a stylistic response to style" (*Plural I* 1). I cannot help but read this through the epideictic. When it comes to teaching, what teaches is a showing forth; learning, the other end of the activity, is a demonstrative showing forth of its own in response. After reading *The Plural I*, William Irmscher concluded, in the pages of *CCC*, that "I don't want to be like Coles" but still praised the book for its narrative scholarship nonetheless (87). Coles took offense at Irmscher's comments (see "Looking Back" 273), but this is perhaps the best response Coles could hope for: a stylistic response, Irmscher rethinking his own teaching and writing in light of Coles's *epideixis*.

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## Notes

1. For Coles's account of trying to publish his book, see "Looking Back on *The Plural I*."
2. For reviews of *The Plural I*, see Keith; Higgins. For reviews of its reissue ten years later, see Keroes; Flachmann; L. Walker.
3. George Kennedy also objects to Aristotle's past-present-future model, calling it "somewhat strained" (*Rhetoric* 1358b, fn. 81). See also Rollins (6–7).
4. These are common definitions of the epideictic. See Jost (17); Prelli (2); Rosenfield (135); J. Walker (9).
5. For additional functions of the epideictic, see Sullivan's "The Epideictic Rhetoric of Science" (232–33) and "The Ethos of Epideictic Encounter" (115–16).
6. Rhetoricians have questioned the relevance of the epideictic for our post-modern, fragmented, partisan society. See Sheard (788); Sullivan, "Epideictic Character" (339); Sullivan, "Closer" (82).

7. Coles taught a number of NEH summer seminars on assignment sequences. For three pieces coming out of those seminars see Coles, “New Presbyters as Old Priests: A Forewarning,”; Abartis; Donovan. See also Coles’s ad in *College Composition and Communication* for his “Seminar in Sequencing.” In “The Sense of Nonsense as a Design for Sequential Writing Assignments,” Coles explains how he writes an assignment sequence. For analyses of Coles’s assignments see Garay (103–04); Sirc (145–46).

8. Coles reuses this passage in many of his publications. See *Composing* (2); *Composing II* (17); *The Plural I—and After* (12); *Seeing through Writing* (8); *Teaching Composing* (10), and “The Teaching of Writing as Writing” (113). Coles’s course description draws heavily from Theodore Baird’s. For Baird’s course description, see Varnum (249–52). Coles is frequently linked to Baird and Amherst (see Boe 6; Garay 101; Keith, “Review of *Composing*” 68; Higgins 106; Horner 179–87; Russell 441; Varnum 222; L. Walker 254–55). But to simply group him into the “Amherst Mafia” (Berthoff 72) is not nuanced enough. In interviews with Robin Varnum, Coles and other members of the Amherst Mafia “displayed what I [Varnum] took to be a desire to disabuse me of any notion I might have had that they were acolytes of Baird” (224). Coles confesses that Baird “helped me to find myself as a teacher” (*Composing II* 1), even though “Baird had made it impossible for others to imitate him” (qtd. in Varnum 224). See Coles’s “Teaching Writing, Teaching Literature” for his own account of teaching under Baird.

9. Coles’s class at Case is all men, and so Coles uses masculine pronouns throughout *The Plural I*. In his other scholarship, though, Coles struggled with pronouns. In 1978, Coles wrote a response to his own article, “Teaching the Teaching of Composition,” furious that CCC had edited his generic masculine pronouns to be gender inclusive. Coles goes out of his way in the response to use phrases that call attention to their pronouns, such as “fisherperson of persons” (“Response” 209), and makes many crude jokes along the way. His response prompted one from Julia P. Stanley and Susan Robbins Wolfe, not at all amused by Coles. In his 1978 “New Presbyters as Old Priests,” Coles says in a footnote, “To avoid the awkwardness of style, I am using the masculine pronoun to refer to the individual regardless of sex” (5). His 1981 *Composing II* has a footnote explaining that Coles will alternate between a generic masculine and a generic feminine (5). In a 1991 piece in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Coles changes all masculine pronouns to feminine in passages quoted from Wayne Booth and John Jay Chapman (“Writing”). When asked about Coles’s editing of those pronouns—what prompted it, if an editor might have had a hand in it—then-editor of *RSQ* Eugene Garver responded in an email exchange with me, “i have no idea. wish i could help [*sic*].”

10. The Themewriting game can be read alongside Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's templates in *They Say/I Say*, the former showing forth the trite and banal, the latter reifying the academy's shared values concerning argument, both working from the premise that writers make certain moves in certain situations. There are echoes of the Themewriting Game in Stacey Waite's *Teaching Queer*, where the students speak of the "format sentences" they write to piece together an essay (59–60).

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