This review essay addresses pedagogical principles found in Scott Newstok’s recent book How to Think Like Shakespeare: Lessons from a Renaissance Education (2020). Specifically, the essay discusses the progymnasmata exercises of paraphrase and ëthopoeia and provides real-life applications and examples. The essay also suggests how such study aims at “fruitful” effects, as well as providing distinctions between “fruitful” and “useful” study. Other points relevant to the fruitful ends of the study of the liberal arts, such as freedom and empathy, are discussed as they pertain to a student’s ability to think creatively and to express thoughts with clarity and originality. Finally, the essay highlights James Baldwin’s experience with reading, hating, and eventually accepting Shakespeare in order to provide readers with a tangible example of the fruitful ends of liberal education.

Scott Newstok’s recent book, How to Think Like Shakespeare, has been tucked inside my bookbag for the past couple of months. It’s not that I can’t put the book down so much as that it represents something special—something I want to hang on to because of the possibilities it brings about whenever I walk into the classroom. I teach lots of different kinds of courses, online and in-person, from freshman composition to art courses, general humanities courses to English literature. What unites all of the students in these varied courses and formats is each student’s belief in what education can do. Education is thrilling because it causes well barricaded doors to blast open. Education vents the brain; thoughts of fresh air come in and conversation ensues. Wonderful as this is, I believe the main reason that cohort after cohort lines up to enter college, especially to take courses in our field, has to do with something even deeper. As our fields become increasingly hyper-specialized, and our scholarly
research and publications have less and less in common with what actually happens in a typical undergraduate college classroom, this moment is one particularly auspicious for serious teachers to stop and reflect upon college from a different perspective from our own. After all, even we were all once undergraduates.

Changing places with my undergraduate self, I would say that I enrolled in college because I sought “truth.” Now stop and remind yourself: Why did you enter college?

As I progressed through the degree, it became more and more clear to me that truth and freedom are closely related, as in, the truth will set you free. Newstok touches on some of these ideas in a chapter called, “Of Freedom.”1 He draws attention to a piece James Baldwin wrote called “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare,” and quotes from Baldwin’s essay:

My quarrel with the English language has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter in quite another way. If the language was not my own, it might be the fault of the language; but it might also be my fault. Perhaps the language was not my own because I had never attempted to use it, had only learned to imitate it.2

The sentiment Baldwin expresses above compresses much of what is wonderful about Newstok’s book and also why I am excited to get back into the classroom tomorrow. Education is a process and Newstok devotes an entire chapter to “imitation,” the rhetorical stage Baldwin alludes to above.3 The imitation of authors, models, exemplary passages, turns of phrase, and even sentence patterns represents a crucial step toward gaining the ability to express oneself freely with language. Indeed, imitation is how we learn anything “human,” whether it be carpentry, a golf swing, how to rap, play piano, or paint portraits. Yet imitation is only a stage. It is curious and somewhat of a paradox, but it is the case that imitation somehow

1 Newstok, How to Think, 140-151.
2 Newstok, How to Think, 147.
3 Newstok, How to Think, chapter 8, “Imitation,” 72-83.
leads to personal freedom: “[A]fter a period of disciplined imitation something remarkable happens…[the writer] ‘starts sounding like himself.’” This experience echoes the very concept Baldwin appears to have come to realize in the passage quoted above. Newstok further develops this point, “Baldwin saw that he must move beyond the necessary but early stage of imitation, to the stage that makes that external voice internal, synthesizing it into one’s own…ultimately, an act of freedom.”

Building upon this notion of freedom and imitation, there is a “classic political distinction” to be made, Newstok says, “between negative liberty and positive liberty. It’s the difference between ‘freedom from’ (as in I am slave to no man) and ‘freedom to’ (as in, I am my own master).” This insight is crucial, for the temptation to focus pedagogical approaches utterly upon the notion of “negative liberty” is a great one today. It is all well and good to identify aspects of negative freedom which have curtailed the agency of subjects in various ways throughout history, however, it is also beneficial to students to provide them with particular abilities now, so they may have the “freedom to.”

Hence the so-called “liberal arts.” Historically speaking, liberal meant “free” and arts meant much more than we ascribe to the term today; it meant something all-inclusive like “know how,” “ability,” “craft,” “technique,” and “science”:

The emancipatory artes liberales were crafts of freedom: the highest level of thinking suitable to a free citizen—the bane of every despot. Such an educational program presumes that freedom is fragile, demanding vigilant, endless exertion: there is nothing more arduous than the apprenticeship of freedom.

4 Newstok, How to Think, 82. In the quote within the quote, Newstok is quoting a statement George Saunders made on imitation and originality.

5 Newstok, How to Think, 147.

6 Newstok, How to Think, 148.

7 Newstok, How to Think, 149.
Baldwin’s conversation with Shakespeare began as outright hostility and opposition, with resistance—a desire to be “free from” having to read Shakespeare at all, and the desire to be free of all the structure of oppression he had understood Shakespeare to represent. However, it is interesting to see how Baldwin came to apprehend a much more radical positive freedom—the freedom to make Shakespeare his own: “Baldwin achieved a mutual recognition in Shakespeare that few of us ever reach—an inner freedom which cannot be attained in any other way than through inhabiting other minds through art.”

Newstok makes the further point that a “double translation” phenomenon was at work in this process, that is, that Baldwin came to see his own language in a new way through or with Shakespeare. In a sense, this is similar to how Shakespeare came to understand English himself, since he (and everyone else at the time) studied Latin, not “English” in school.

But what does this mean exactly, “an inner freedom which cannot be attained in any other way than through inhabiting other minds through art?” Indeed, it is the case that the main thrust and aim of Newstok’s book, as well as the subject of his many shortish chapters, is compressed in this odd statement. The pedagogical principle underpinning this process of reading and conversing with a text comes by way of entering into a text in a peculiar fashion—through creative reading and writing.

The education that Shakespeare (and Milton, Queen Elizabeth, Spenser, Margaret Cavendish, and Ben Jonson) received might be best described as an education which was thoroughly active. It emphasized creativity and original thought, and it inculcated these outcomes not by the verification of the “Assessments” of our parlance, but rather by the blunders, defeats, and stumbles that one always expects in practice. In chapters 8 & 9, Newstok discusses

8 Newstok, How to Think, 148.
9 Newstok, How to Think, 147; also see, 79-80.
imitation and a couple of the exercises of the progymnasmata. One of these exercises, éthopoeia, as Newstok puts it, “encouraged a rural English schoolboy to envisage what it might be like to occupy a different gender, in a different nation, observing a different religion, within a different era, under duress of different events.”\footnote{Newstok, \textit{How to Think}, 92.} Éthopoeia, the imitation of the character of another, asks the student to “impersonate another persona in a hypothetical scenario. The goal is to \textit{imitate that you may be different}. Today, we tell students to ‘find their voice.’ Tudor educators did the opposite: sound like someone else.”\footnote{Newstok, \textit{How to Think}, 91.} Shakespeare was lauded for his ability to perceive what others perceived—a crucial activity that I think many would agree to be \textit{absolutely lacking} in many areas today. Margaret Cavendish and Elizabeth Montagu both marveled at Shakespeare’s ability to empathize. Montagu said Shakespeare could “throw his soul into the body of another man, and be at once possessed of his sentiments, adopt his passions, and rise to all the functions and feelings of his situation.”\footnote{Newstok, \textit{How to Think}, 92.} Many agree.

In the classroom, I find that this exercise of éthopoeia translates well into various activities and formats. For example, in a standard first- or second-year composition and rhetoric course, a basic “character sketch” assignment can be enlightening. Theophrastus’s character types, such as the loquacious, the shameless, the oligarch, or the penurious types are a wonderful source of invention for this kind of assignment, but so are just everyday types that students come up with in class, such as the mechanic, the teacher, the doctor, the lawyer, the fashion model, the Silicon Valley software developer, etc. Students can write 200-400 words sketching out the character, adding dialogue and description as needed. In a drama or a poetry class, impersonation may be performed by way of memorization and recitation. My students often elect to memorize poetry for an “extra credit” assignment that I include on the syllabus. Students

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11 Newstok, \textit{How to Think}, 92.  
12 Newstok, \textit{How to Think}, 91.  
13 Newstok, \textit{How to Think}, 92.
who memorize poetry nearly always relate back to me that they were happy to have memorized the lines (usually 75 lines or so) and that they feel that their memory is stronger for having done so. Truly, memorizing poetry begets a closeness to the text which simply cannot be replicated, and the lines become part of the student, not to mention the feelings and empathy which ensue from such closeness and the passions aroused in the delivery of lines.

Another exercise of the *progymnasmata* is paraphrase. This exercise led Shakespeare to further develop his innate genius to retell stories. In fact, Shakespeare never seems to have entirely “made up” the plot for even one of his plays. Paraphrases, or the creative retelling of stories, may take all kinds of shapes. In his treatise on the *progymnasmata*, Hermogenes provides a memorable example of how to paraphrase with fables, the first stage of the *progymnasmata*:

> Fables are sometimes to be expanded, sometimes to be told concisely, now by telling in bare narrative, and now by feigning the words of the given characters. For example. “The monkeys in council deliberated on the necessity of settling in houses. When they made up their minds to this end and were about to set to work, an old monkey restrained them, saying that they would more easily be captured if they were caught within enclosures.” Thus if you wish to be concise; but if you wish to expand, proceed in this way. “The monkeys in council deliberated on the founding of a city; and one coming forward made a speech to the effect that they too must have a city. “For, see,” said he, “how fortunate in this regard are men. Not only does each of them have a house, but all going up together to public meeting or theater delight their souls with all manner of things to see and hear.” Go on thus, dwelling on the incidents and saying that the decree was formally passed; and devise a speech for the old monkey.14

As can be seen from the quote above, the fable “The Monkeys in Council” could be easily expanded by adding dialogue. Shakespeare practiced this very exercise. However, there are lots of other creative exercises one can do with paraphrase: poetry may be paraphrased into prose, narrative put into poetry, dialogue paraphrased into poetry, a

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14 Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education*, 182-183.
drama rewritten as prose, as an art piece, or as a screenplay (and so forth). Shakespeare paraphrased the stories he found in Plutarch, Holinshed, Cinthio, Lodge, Belleforest, and Saxo Grammaticus (to name a few) into drama—but then he also did much more. He *changed* the stories he found in those sources *for the better* in his retellings, ennobling characters, sympathizing with them, and changing key details.\(^\text{15}\)

Herein lies Shakespeare’s real genius. In addition to this, Shakespeare often used varieties of paraphrase techniques to incorporate and adapt various layers of material into his stories. For example, Shakespeare took the Aesop fable, “The Belly and the Members” and paraphrased it in such a way that he wove the fable into the dramatic lines which open the play *Coriolanus*.\(^\text{16}\) The very basic exercise of paraphrase enabled Shakespeare to write perhaps some of the most original and gripping lines of all of his plays, and it has certainly enabled screenwriters, producers, and directors to paraphrase Shakespeare’s plays into film as “adaptations.”

By now some of my patient readers may be thinking, “what for?” What exactly would be the end or *telos* of this kind of pedagogy? One answer to this is the obvious: To think like Shakespeare!

Another answer comes by way of my own teaching experience. I find that exercises like character sketches, impersonation, development of dialogues, paraphrases, retelling fables, and the like (there are many more!) translate well into all sorts of applications. I would add that I have had great success in adapting these kinds of activities in online courses too. Online learners often learn best by doing, rather than by passively receiving videos or readings, and these exercises facilitate excitement for students because they lead to creativity,

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\(^{15}\) The character of Othello is an excellent example—compare Shakespeare’s hero Othello to Cinthio’s character. Also see my article in *Quidditas*, “The Role of Rumor and the Prodigal Son” (Vol. 36, Article 7). In the case of the *Henriad*, Shakespeare changed very little in his retelling of Holinshed’s history of Henry V, but he completely changed the other source he used, *Famous Victories of Henry V*, the source which inspired his memorable Falstaff.

\(^{16}\) Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, act 1, scene 1, 99-155.
to immersion into texts, and to personal engagement. They lead to original writing. As a quick aside—I should mention that I think Newstok rather too casually dismisses online learning in the book, and that the book would be greatly improved if revised to be more considerate and sympathetic to the millions of students enrolled in these types of classes.

In any event, the basic principles touched on in the book provide for unique experiences to nudge students along on the path toward attaining more pointed creative thought and writing. Creative thought doesn’t necessarily lead to creative writing per se—after all, all writing is creative writing. Creative thought refers to the freedom to be able to think for oneself, to the freedom to be able, “to occupy leisure nobly,” as Aristotle says in Book VIII of the Politics.17

Newstok makes this point early on in his book when specifically addressing pedagogy. Here he distinguishes between different types of utility, such as “short-term utility,” “material utility,” and “long term utility.”18 He further states:

For Aristotle, the end of study (long-term utility) was to develop citizens who would flourish in a democracy. Education cultivated habits for the end of becoming a good [person], skilled in speaking, with an eye toward action: To be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds.19

The distinction between different kinds of utility is important to make because it suggests how learning and pedagogy may effect different ends. “Long-term” utility is necessarily at odds with “short-term” or “material” utility because of the objects and aims of each kind of study. To develop this point, Aristotle distinguishes the useful arts from the fruitful arts by stating that the fruitful arts are, “acquired merely in the pleasure in their pursuit, and that these studies and these branches of learning are ends in themselves,” whereas, he says, the useful or “necessary” arts, “are studied as necessary and as

17 Aristotle, Politics VIII, 639.
18 Newstok, How to Think, 22.
19 Newstok, How to Think, 22.
means to other things.”\textsuperscript{20} This is important to keep in mind for all of us who teach the humanities, a type of study deeply rooted in liberal education.

As we research and publish scholarly articles on niche issues in order to be able to engage in the high-level scholarly conversations happening within our respective disciplines, we necessarily manufacture a kind of trade or “vocational knowledge,” and this kind of knowledge is unfit for education in the liberal mode. In fact, I remember vividly that when I entered graduate school the first talk I received from the graduate director went something like this, “You need to publish now. The clock is ticking. As soon as you are in graduate school your chances of getting a job decrease exponentially if you are not publishing in your field. You need to read job ads and see what the trends are and adjust to these conversations.” I remember thinking to myself that this isn’t why I entered graduate school at all (no…I was still stubbornly attracted to truth, freedom, and all of that). The irony of this strikes me hard now as I reflect upon the vastly different kinds of knowledge our students may receive when taking a course in the humanities.

In an essay called, “Labor, Leisure, and Liberal Education,” Mortimer Adler made a similar point by distinguishing different ends to the study of the same subject, carpentry:

\begin{quote}
One might wish to learn carpentry simply to acquire the skill or art of using tools to fabricate things out of wood, an art or skill that anyone is better for having. Or one might wish to learn carpentry in order to make good tables and chairs, not as works of art which reflect the excellence of the artist, but as commodities to sell.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

The fruitful end of the knowledge of knowing how to fabricate things out of wood represents an “intrinsic” end rather than an “external” end. These ends correspond to the distinction made between “useful” and “fruitful” learning. Fruitful learning has an intrinsic

\textsuperscript{20} Aristotle, \textit{Politics} VIII, 641.

\textsuperscript{21} Adler, “Labor, Leisure, and Liberal Education,” 36.
effect because it changes the learner, as “an improvement built right into [her] nature as a good habit is part of the nature of the person in whom a power is habituated.” Fruitful learning makes humans more human, as creatures always in the process of growing—like how trees become more like trees as they grow.

Although certainly quirky, Scott Newstok’s book vents the brain and engages the reader into conversation about what matters in the classroom and in life. What is education? What is it to be free? What is the purpose of life? Naturally if one has the leisure to muse upon these kinds of questions with seriousness, she becomes unfit for enslavement—be it to ideological fashions, economical systems, or political trends. The fruitful ends of the liberal arts I have sketched above equip one to think, to empathize with others, and to be able to creatively articulate original ideas in writing. In short, this kind of study provides one with the ability to both think and do. Earning the freedom (and habit) to be able to see an idea from multiple perspectives, as well as the freedom to be able to evaluate those perspectives with the aim of finding the most reasonable one, and then having the ability to articulate one’s views with clarity and intellectual force, this is precisely what education should lead us all to do. Perhaps this helps explain why James Baldwin ended up taking to Shakespeare after all.

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Bibliography


