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Juanita Smart

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Harmonic Compromise and the Diagnosis of Composition

Juanita Smart

"That's the 'action' of the piano," David Severance informs me as I eye the denture-like keyboard which sprawls across the length of Dave's work table at Washington State University. Extracted from its piano housing, the keyboard looks like the misplaced grin of a giant Cheshire cat. I have never seen piano keys lifted "out of context" like this before, and hearing them referred to as the "action," of the piano is also new to me. On assignment from a graduate teaching seminar, the Diagnosis and Evaluation of Composition, I am listening now to Dave's explanations regarding the fine art of piano tuning, hoping to learn something from him about the evaluative process I engage in as a "tuner" of student writing. While I have frequently encouraged my own students in the use of metaphor as a useful heuristic for generating thought and insight, I'm wondering how this metaphorical exploration will enrich my own consciousness and experience as a student/teacher/writer?

I study the row of piano keys which Dave has disconnected from the vault of a Baldwin model C piano case. Suddenly I feel overwhelmed. Each key represents a complicated infrastructure, a complex system of wooden levers, joints and jaws, pads, cushions, hammers and stops, buttons, screws, rockers and lifter wires, pins and springs. I stare at these parts, the underlying details of musical composition, each one crafted from vari-

ous combinations of wood and metal, leather and felt. Collectively these components create intricate interfacings of support and leverage, delicate angles of tension and release, calibrated weights and pressures, precise ratios of distance and alignment—complicated parts and relationships that in collaboration with the pianist promise as much for creative achievement as they do for the possibility of failure.

J. Cree Fischer defines "action" as "the keys and all those intricate parts which convey the motion of the key to the hammers which strike the strings, and the dampers which mute them" (17). But "action" is also a word I will use to speak about the English 101 papers I "tune" with an ear towards helping my students refine and sometimes reinvent their work. Situated within the context of freshman composition, the word "action" vividly portrays the complicated, if not noisy dynamics that words, mechanics, invention, logic, arrangement, and style share with one another in relationships that have the potential to both block and energize student acts of sounding forth meaning from the page. Dave acknowledges that piano tuning is repetitive work, but because he has been tuning and repairing pianos for 20 years now, he has developed a facility for "reading" the pianos that he tunes. He identifies most problems by eyeballing the movement of the action and by listening to the tones it produces. While instruct-

ing me that a piano tuner must know when to “let the hammer find its equilibrium,” he cautions that “you can screw up by over-adjusting.” He also notes that “you make the action conform to [tuning] standards, but if it doesn’t work right, then you have to break the rules.” Later, I learn that this contradictory relationship between obeying and breaking the rules of tuning theory constitutes the “harmonic compromise” that governs effective piano tuning.

“All at once ‘harmony,’ which we thought was only one thing, becomes a matter about which decisions have to be made, and about which compromise is possible—even necessary. This shakes us” (Sullivan ix).

I am reading Amanda’s paper, “Costumes in Medea.” She has provided a clear summary of the play. Her sentences are more complex than they have been in the past and they work well. She seems more sure of herself in this paper, more sophisticated in her style—she even uses a hyphen and uses it correctly! But I note in reading that she has inserted quotations into her text without anchoring them to her own words. This has happened before. I have pointed out this problem to her in at least one personal conference and have written her a lengthy comment on another paper about her need to introduce quotations by grafting them into her own sentences. Calling her attention to this dilemma has grown repetitive for me. If I call attention to her need to “conform” again will I be “over-adjusting”? What I want to do is reinforce her confidence, let her know that I really feel engaged by her use of language this time. I want her to remember what she did well on this paper, not what she did badly.

I say nothing at all about the mechanical awkwardness of the quotations. Instead I write, “Amanda, this paper is your best writing so far—very clear and well organized. Strong illustrations from your research to back up what you are talking about.” I give this, her third paper, a “B+,” even though I think it might be more accurately marked a “B,” because right now that seems the best way to help her find her equilibrium as a writer.

“A piano tuner is a Listener, not just one who hears. Her listening is not something she

does, suddenly, each time she opens the piano lid; she is doing it all the time, like breathing. And the tuning, a result of listening, is not imposed upon the piano” (Sullivan 5-6).

I am accompanying David to Kimbrough Hall to watch him tune a piano there. Inside the recital auditorium he leads me to two concert pianos, mounted side by side on the stage. Both pianos are covered with quilted pads that fit their contours like tailored pajamas. David peels back the covering on the Baldwin and his fingers tumble up and down the keys. He slides across to the other piano bench and teases the keys of the Steinway in the same way. He wants me to hear the difference in the sounds of each instrument. “He’s reading the action,” I think, “in the same way that I read the ‘action’ in my students’ papers.” Dave identifies pianos by their timbre and tone—by the way in which differences in sounds are executed from the actions of the pianos—in the same way that I recognize anonymous student writers, not so much by the identifying marks of the handwriting, but by the way the words are being used, by the way in which the language is being executed, by the play of each “voice” across the page.

We have entered a professor’s studio. Dave props a computerized tuner, called the “Sanderson Accu-Tuner” on top of the piano. He has decided not to tune this piano by ear, but to do it electronically so that he can listen to me asking him questions. The computer flashes with red lights each time Dave strikes a note. When he grips the tuning pin with his tuning hammer and twists it, first one way, then the other, I recall what it felt like once to twist a loose tooth out of my mouth. Dave tries to explain to me about the significant differences between “tuning” and “tempering” a piano. But my ear has not been trained to listen as his has, through years of experience and practice. While Dave easily identifies the gradations of sound that cohabit the air after he strikes two keys, those vibrating nuances escape my detection. Not to appear dumb, I nod my head agreeably as if I understand, exactly, the tonal differences he is pointing out to me. But I am not getting it at all. My students do the same thing in

English 101 when they “don’t get” my explanations about how writing works.

Later on I remember this scene in the studio and smile when I read Meffen’s comment that “being in tune is crucial to music making, but giving a clear definition of [what is meant by ‘being in tune’] is not always easy” (5). I resonate with Meffen’s observation, remembering my own failed attempts to help my students understand how I define an “in tune” paper. But Meffen also explains the important differences between “tuning” and “tempering” a piano. His discussion compels me to consider a less legalistic and more humane formulation of the tuning process:

*The word tune can have two separate though closely allied meanings. The first of these refers to the manipulation of the apparatus of a particular instrument in order to make it playable, without specifying the musical elements involved. The second refers to rendering an instrument playable by setting intervals which are pure or just.... **To temper, however, means to render an instrument playable by setting intervals which are not pure or just** [emphasis mine]. (7)*

I associate Meffen’s explanation with something David said about there being degrees of “in” and “out of” tuneness for an instrument, and that if you tune a piano to the “pure” key of C, for instance, then the piano may not sound in tune when played in the key of E. Hence, an experienced piano tuner learns to allow for degrees of “in and out of” tuneness, listening to each instrument with an ear that respects the piano’s plural possibilities for harmony.

I am thinking about Kevin, a student who finished the basic writing course fall semester and enrolled in my class the following spring. Kevin acknowledges to me that he has a writing problem, but promises to work hard in my class. I encourage him to come and see me and to visit the Writing Lab during the composing process of his first paper. He never does. His first paper is so tangled with misspellings and punctuation problems and so contorted syntactically, that it is almost impossible for me to identify the thread of his ideas. I stop reading at the top of his second page and note in my lengthy end comment where I stopped reading. I also tell him bluntly that what

I want to do is kick his “butt in gear” so that he will pass the class, but I clarify that only he can do that for himself. I refuse to grade his paper until he comes to talk to me.

At the end of the next class period, Kevin follows me back to my office. I ask him to read his paper out loud to me. I am fascinated by the amount of revision that occurs when Kevin reads his paper out loud—grammatical revisions that he makes orally as he labors over the page. Kevin is not aware of the changes he is making. Once I even cover two words simultaneously with my fingers to rivet his attention on the word sandwiched in between them, which is a disfigured version of the word he actually reads aloud three times in succession. We talk for over an hour about his writing.

I want to help Kevin identify his patterns of error so that he will be able to listen to the intervals of his own language and convert his discordant expression into appropriate unisons of meaning. But to do this I must make allowances; I must compromise my stance towards what constitutes acceptable freshman writing and adjust my reading of his papers; I must tune my response to the internal logic of Kevin’s writing, rather than tune his writing to my response. I require Kevin to spend a certain amount of time each week in the Writing Lab and in conference with me. I recommend that he read his finished paper out loud and tape it, then submit both the written and taped versions to me for his final grade.

Kevin works very hard, sometimes revising papers five times before handing them in to me. He writes a moving essay about the rhetorical differences between Masuji Ibuse’s “Black Rain” and Sidney Shalett’s 1945 *New York Times* editorial, “The First Atomic Bomb Dropped,” two contrasting accounts about the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He writes in part about the “torture” of the Japanese victims, a word that he spells “toucher” on the printed page. My eyes latch onto that spelling error as an ironic representation of meaning—“toucher” not only animates his writing with the painful “oucher” that “torture” signifies, but it also depicts the “oucher” of pain that I experience as I struggle to negotiate

Kevin's unconventional, but complex registries of meaning.

I ask David for an example of his most challenging repair job. David responds that he is responsible for 65 pianos on campus, and that because he is engaged in this kind of "institutional maintenance," he does not have time for heavy rebuilding—his job cannot require that of him. Consequently he prioritizes the types of pianos he tunes: concert pianos are the most important, faculty studio pianos come next, then the classroom pianos, and finally the practice pianos, which receive the smallest portion of Dave's time because practice pianos are used for "95 percent of the students' dirty work."

The phrase "institutional maintenance" hums in my head. I mull it over in my mind. How does Dave's responsibility for 65 pianos compare with my responsibility for 25 students per class, multiplied by five papers per student, multiplied by five pages per paper per semester? Can the diagnosis and maintenance of a minimum 625 pages of "practice" writing be compared to the diagnosis and maintenance of 65 pianos? Is "institutional maintenance" the best that students at Washington State University can hope for from Graduate Teaching Assistants in composition and literature?

I think of Kevin, and the term "institutional maintenance" strikes a dissonant chord within my own responsive consciousness as student/teacher/writer. "Institutional maintenance" may be cost effective and politically expedient for university pianos, but its pedagogical repercussions promise costly consequences for undergraduates and those who teach them. I wrestle with this disturbing implication of my own analogy. While academic institutions may choose to ignore "practice" pianos, higher learning cannot afford to ignore "practice" writers. Culturally, we cannot afford to reserve our resources for the culturally elite, because attention to the crude "action" of each writer is crucial at that point in time where unskilled thought and language is hammered out and plied into knowledge. Unlike Dave's attention to pianos, attention to writers must not be "prioritized" according to the sophistication of their abilities, because thought must be teased, and tested, and compromised through

language in a way that values the "dirty work" of invention and converts that dirty work into the well tempered "action" of the experienced writer later on.

I ask David how he would describe a piano that's in tune. He pauses for a moment and then replies, "A piano that's in tune would sound clear, clean, and solid—you don't have to guess at all." When I ask him what makes a good piano, he tells me that a good piano depends on design and execution—a combination of materials and arrangement. A good piano is "labor intensive," "hard to duplicate," and "takes an experienced person to make it work."

"A piano is built, among other things, to resist" (Sullivan 10).

I have just finished reading Thuy's paper which discusses cinematic special effects and applies that discussion to the movie "Dances with Wolves." The paper engages my attention and is mechanically clean. I read it rapidly. I sprinkle it with comments like, "really sophisticated way for you to work this quote in, Thuy," and "I learn something here," and "good application to your own event here." The paper demonstrates an experienced use of language. But the bibliography page is all wrong. Thuy has both numbered and alphabetized her sources and provided author and title names, but no publishers. I could overlook this, but Thuy is one of my better students. Later on, she will ask me to write her a recommendation for pharmacy school. I can't let the bibliography page slide. I want her to develop habits of mind which will serve her well in the future even if provoking her to do so makes her mad at me now. But even more than that I think that Thuy expects me to require her best work. At the end of her paper I write: "Thuy—a very fine paper—smooth, clear, focused, illustrated well with relevant applications to the movie. This paper earns a well deserved "A" but not until you revise your bibliography page according to the MLA guide in your textbook." I write it that way and I mean it.

As I consider the diagnosis and evaluation of pianos, I find useful applications that invite me to revise my own habits of thinking and talking about the diagnosis and evaluation of student

writing. Ann Berthoff identifies significant insights in student apprehension as moments of "allatonceness" (547), what less professionally established practitioners, my own coterie of graduate school colleagues included, customarily refer to as the "it clicked!" phenomenon. Too often, however, this circumstance is perceived by teachers and students alike as a performative event, the realization of a platinum moment. But those prosperous episodes might be more fruitfully redefined as consequences of a persevering "practice" that follows unpredictable intervals of "in and out of" tuneness. The instructor hopes that "it" clicks by the end of the semester, and the student does too, but more frequently the only thing that "clicks" in the classroom is the loud mechanism of the electronic clock, ticking off institutional agendas. Reflecting on the harmonic compromise of piano tuning, however, I discover a principle that enables me to re-envision student literacy as habits of mind that are mediated and improved with practice throughout time. Using the theory of harmonic compromise to interrogate my thinking and talking about student writing, I envision learning situations in which possibilities are more significant than certainties, and in which true knowledge ensues from the "dirty work" of learning how to play, a messy situation which more realistically depicts the one I experience as student/teacher/writer.

"You have entered a dimension in which 'pure' and 'exact' are measured in some way other than by counting. Intuition takes over here. . . . And then, I think, you fall the rest of the way in, to unison.... You can never know what happened on the way over, because you were falling.... I think the listening piano tuner has to learn how to fall that last bit. . . . And I think the piano's song is right there, in the falling-in place, which is the final tempering" (Sullivan 95).

The place where I "fall" in the final tempering of my students' papers is the place where I struggle, the place where we tug back and forth at the language and negotiate its terms. The place where I fall in the final tempering of my students' papers is the place where I listen, learning how much slack and how much tension I must apply to negotiate a space for the student's meaning to sound forth. The falling-in place is not the free-falling place of an idealized harmony, or the over-adjusted place of pure melodic sound, but the collapsible falling "in and out" place that accommodates the shifting intervals and creative tension of our harmonic compromise.

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