part II

A METHOD OF COMPOSING

Introduction: The Auditor and the Sheep Dog

To observe carefully, to think cogently, to write coherently: these are all forming activities. If you consider the composing process as a continuum of forming, then you can take advantage of the fact that you are born a composer. The way you make sense of the world is the way you write: how you construe is how you construct. You can set about learning to write, confident that composition is not a matter of hammering together words and phrases, sentences and paragraphs, according to standard patterns that somebody else tells you to superimpose. It's a matter, rather, of learning how to use the forms of language to discover the forms of thought and vice versa. By conceiving of meanings not as things but as relationships, you can avoid the futile question of which comes "first"—the chicken or the egg dilemma—and explore instead the mutual dependence of choosing and limiting, identifying and differentiating, finding and creating forms. You can discard the faulty notion that when you compose, "you figure out what you want to say before you write," and accept, instead, this more helpful slogan: *You can't know what you mean until you hear what you say.* Like *form finds form,* this formula suggests the mutual dependence of ends and means, which is at the heart of composition.

Studying the composing process can teach you that ideas are not floating in the air, waiting to be brought down to earth; thoughts are not nonverbal butterflies that you catch with a verbal butterfly net.* The relationship between thought and language is dialectical: ideas are conceived by language; language is generated by thought. (*Conceive, generate:* sexual metaphors are indispensable in describing the life of the mind unless you want to consider the mind a machine and speak of *products.* Composing, in this book, is considered as an organic process, not a mechanical one.)

A composition is a bundle of parts. When you compose, you "get it together," but the "it" is not a matter of things or "words"; what you get together in composing is relationships, meanings. In composing, you make parts into wholes; you compose the way you think—by seeing relationships, by naming, defining, and articulating relationships. What makes it hard is that you have to do two things at once: you have to bundle the parts as if you knew what the whole was going to be and you have to figure out the whole in order to decide which parts are going to fit and which are not. The only way to do that is to keep everything tentative, recognizing that getting the parts together, figuring out the whole, is a dialectical process.

Dialectic is the term we will use throughout this book to name the mutual dependence of language and thought, all the ways in which a word finds a thought and a thought, a word. The most useful definition for our purposes comes from I. A. Richards who calls dialectic a *continuing audit of meaning.*† Just as a bookkeeper has to account for income and expenditures in order to balance credits and debits, an audit of meanings would have to balance what one sentence seems to say against what others seem to say; how one way of saying something compares with another; what one word seems to refer to in a certain context with what it seems to refer to in another. Of course, *audit* also has to do with listening. In composing, you have to be your own auditor in both senses: you have to listen in on the inner dialogue, which is thinking, and you have to be able to

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* I. A. Richards puts the matter this way in "The Future of Poetry," reprinted in *So Much Nearer: Essays Towards a World English* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), p. 175.

† See *How to Read a Page* (Boston: Beacon, 1959), p. 240 and *Speculative Instruments* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), p. 109.

balance the account of what you've been hearing against what is set down on paper.

In all its phases, composing is conversation you are having with yourself—or *selves,* since you are speaker, audience, and critic all at once. You do the talking, the answering, and the kibbitzing. When you are making meaning in sentences, gathering sentences to compose paragraphs and paragraphs to construct arguments, you are doing the same kind of thing you do when you carry on a conversation. But then why is it, generally speaking, more difficult to write than it is to talk? (I say "generally speaking" because all of us find occasionally that putting something on paper is a lot easier than saying it, speaking it right out to an actual person.) What is there about conversation that's missing when we write? An actual audience, of course.

From an audience, we get feedback, a response that lets us know the effect of our words, a response that helps determine what we say next. Furthermore, in conversation we depend on slang and informal expressions; we are uninhibited except by our sense of propriety about what our audience should hear or could stand to hear. If we get stalled, we can hem and haw and stutter and gesture until we find the words we need; we can count on lowering our voices or raising them to make a point; we can take back anything we wish we hadn't said. When we talk, we stop, wander, get off the track, get back on again. All of this oral composing is easier for most of us most of the time because our sense of the audience keeps us alert to what needs to be said or re-said or un-said.

Learning to write means learning to listen in on the inner dialogue. When you are really listening to a lecture or a discussion, you feel involved; you are recreating the discourse—what's being said—in your head. When you are really listening, you are silently thinking. You can listen in on your own thoughts when you are the "lecturer" and the discussant. Learning to write is a way of making that inner dialogue make sense to others.

The method of composing that is set down in this book is dialectical. The words *dialogue* and *dialectic* are cognate, which means "born together." Each names a linguistic activity or process in which a "twoness" is made one. The following four sections are intended to help you develop a *dialectical* method for making the inner *dialogue* make sense to others. It allows you to take advantage of the fact that every operation involved in composition—naming, opposing, defining—involves all the others. A dialectical method of composing helps you avoid making

hard and fast decisions ahead of time. As Melville remarked, "There are some enterprises in which a careful disorderliness is the true method." Composing by our method is not like plodding down one row and up the next with a mule, and it certainly is not like a tractor tearing along making beautiful, entirely regular patterns. Our method works like a Scottish sheep dog bringing in the sheep: she races back and forth, driving the flock in one direction signaled by the shepherd, but acting in response to the developing occasions, nudging here, circling there; rushing back to round up a stray, dashing ahead to cut off an advance in the wrong direction. When you compose, you are the shepherd and the sheep dog and it's up to you to decide whether you want the sheep in fold, fank, or field and to know how to get them there.

Assisted invitations to try out the method of composing set forth in the following three sections are indicated as before by the sign: 

Sometimes you are invited to write on a particular topic in a particular way, to compose within narrow limits; in other instances, you are invited to discuss certain conventions or to consider one point or another, with no particular writing suggested. But that doesn't mean that you therefore do no writing: developing your own topics is part of your job as a writer and you will have opportunities to practice that skill. When the discussions are carried on in class, it's a good idea to save time for everybody, including the instructor, to write. After a 15-minute discussion—or argument—there is generally plenty to write about, to write with and from.

All the assisted invitations are meant to help you bridge from theory—the *what* and *why*—to practice—the *how*. The exercises offer you a chance to practice on a small scale, but the whole point of a method is that it should help you in real writing. My assumption is that you will be working on papers assigned in other courses while you are studying this book; my hope is that you will make this method of composing your own, adapting it to your needs, putting it to use in writing those papers.

You can use your journal of observations when you respond to the assisted invitations. It will help you be your own audience–critic if you save the left-hand side of the open double page for notes, quotations, drawings, and what we will be calling *chaos* and *oppositions*. Use the right-hand side for composing sentences and paragraphs. Or vice versa: it doesn't matter, so long as you use the facing pages as a way of representing the dialogue/dialectic of the composing process.