

Dangerous Reading: The Unabomber as College Freshman

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Well, *somebody* had to have taught Ted Kaczynski freshman composition at Harvard. I remember thinking about that hapless teaching assistant as I read the turgid manifesto that the Unabomber published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* before he was caught. “Plenty of interesting ideas here,” I might have written on his essay, had he handed in that tome in my class, “but connections among the ideas and to your sources seem to be missing. And have you considered the ethical implications of what you are asserting?” Like everyone else but the FBI and the Unabomber victims, I then put the whole business out of my mind.

But later, after an intense call from an FBI agent, I had to face the terrible fact: Kaczynski had been in my class, Gen Ed A, as we called it at Harvard in the fall of 1958, and I had had my chance to influence his thinking and writing. Oh, yes, the agent said, there was no question, he had been my student. What grade had I given him? I asked. That, it turned out, crazily enough, was classified information. No, I told the FBI, I couldn’t remember anything at all about him or his writing from that class over 40 years ago. I had no records. As I thought about my role in this story I began to shiver: at least I had not remained enough in his mind to receive one of his lethal mailings.

All I know for sure about that class, these reflective years after the FBI called, is what I asked my students to read. There on my shelf sit the texts we used: *Inquiry and Expression: A College Reader* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958) and *The Logic and Rhetoric of Exposition* (same publisher and date). Both of them were edited and written by the directors of Gen Ed A, Harold Martin and Richard Ohmann. What, I ask, as I leaf through their crumbling pages, did Ted Kaczynski take away from those readings?

My eye stops at the third group of readings under “Defining” in the textbook. Here are Plato and Aristotle defining virtue, followed by William James, the good American pragmatist arguing that virtue must be defined through action. Next comes Bertrand Russell’s evocative essay on “Science and Ethics,” which stresses the subjectivity of values: “All systems of ethics embody the desires of those who advocate them, but this fact is concealed in a mist of words.” The last reading in this section is from *Huckleberry Finn*, the powerful scene in which Huck lies to some slave hunters to save his father figure Jim, a terribly hard ethical choice for Mark Twain’s hero because all his training taught him that such an act would surely send him to hell.

My teaching copy of the book is thick with marginal notes, discussion questions, and underlinings. We spent plenty of class time discussing ethical behavior in that class. But I cannot remember just what topics I assigned for the weekly student essays. First-year students then and now are ever-ready to question the givens of ethical behavior and to work out for themselves ways to make their mark on the world. Our job is to help them see these questions in a long and deep tradition of questioning. How did these questions intersect the troubles surely already bubbling in Kaczynski’s mind?

The next section heavily marked by my youthful pencil is entitled “About Machines and Men” and as I reread I am struck by its timeliness as well as by echoes from the Unabomber manifesto. Friedrich Juenger writes in 1948 that machines bring poverty rather than abundance: “The consuming, devouring, gluttonous motion racing through time restlessly and insatiably, reveals that never stilled and never to be stilled hunger of the machine.” Paul Ziff writes about “The Feelings of Robots,” and A. M. Turing (now known as the inventor of the computer) is represented by a 1950 essay on whether machines can think, a question he finally considers pointless, though I recall us debating it furiously. Turing is prophetic and optimistic: “Nevertheless I believe that at the end of the century the use of words and general educated opinion will have altered so much that one will be able to speak of machines thinking without expecting to be contradicted.” It takes my breath away.

Other sections of the book appear to have had very little influence on Kaczynski’s apparent later career. I see thickly annotated chapters on “Concrete and Abstract Language,” “Stock Language and Jargon,” and two entire sections on “The Economy of Style.” Along with every teacher of first-year college writing then and now, I know I spent much time trying to trim away the high-flown verbosity and abstract language of my students. I wonder what I said to Kaczynski. I wonder what I wrote on his papers. I wonder what he took away from our reading and his writing. It is clear that he was not untouched by them.

Of course, thousands of students used these books—read and wrote about these essays—and only one became the Unabomber. We know much less than we should about what it is that twists minds into murderous behavior, what influences play and interplay in disturbed minds, how reading of any sort relates to behavior. Ideas of any kind are dangerous, but first-year college students must encounter ideas of all sorts if they are to enter upon a serious education.

And yet, like any teacher, I am in part defined by my former students. I'm proud of most them, savoring their accomplishments, particularly when they become published writers. I know that any one teacher has only a slight effect, but, as the old saying goes, we never know quite where the influence stops. Was there some point, some 40 years ago in that barren classroom in Cambridge, when I might have done or said something to change Kaczynski's direction? Or worse, was there a moment of callousness in response, or insensitivity to the ethical implications of the reading, that triggered murder in my student's troubled mind? Mercifully, I can never know the answer to that question, though I think I will be asking it for some time. All reading is dangerous and every student has possibilities we hardly imagine.

