

"The word *revolution*, though convenient and fashionable, is one that can mislead if it is used to suggest the clear-cut substitution of one means of communication by another. The Muse never became the discarded mistress of Greece. She learned to write and read while still continuing to sing." —Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write* (23)

ODE TO THE PENN STATE CONFERENCE
ON RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

(Written on the occasion of the 10th Anniversary, July 1991).

O sing me Muse, a Penn State Conference song.

Sing me Muse (but don't take too long).

Forget what Havelock says about the Muse
who learns to read and write, and so peruse;
and those who claim your just Platonic Form,
and with these feeble topoi leave me torn.

I know the Muses are not popular
in composition, rhetoric, and are
rather somewhat antithetical
to the writing process evangelicals,
and even the current-traditional proposition:
creativity is all invention.

Of course *we* know it's always inspiration.

(But how account for all this perspiration!)

[stanza break]

Who said that poetry is not rhetorical—
or that rhetoric is not poetical!

The sophists knew there was no difference
(though orality changes the inference):

Rhetors, poets cheat, and forge, and steal, and lie;
we get tenure, promotion, then we die.

Don't be shy, abandoned little Muse;
with better instincts, inner voice, produce
an Ode that's suitable to read out loud,
an epideictic piece adapted to this crowd
of rhetoricians, teachers, colleagues, friends
who'll applaud or trounce me in the end,
and so redeem yourself, and me as well
from the ravages of freshman hell.

So sing me Muse, a Penn State Conference Song.

Sing it, Muse, of ten years almost gone.

Don't dislike the folk that gather here;
they'll treat you better than the critics there

at that other conference, (M.L.A)—

I'll take the folks in P.A. any day.

How was I to know this wasn't another one of Selzer's jokes?

How was I to know this reading was no hoax!

John T. Harwood, muse, director extraordinaire
will have me strung up if I'm not prepared.
Let's express some rightful gratitude,
this conference where I made my own debut,
(though Michael Halloran, our advisor, decided you
were the one, Greg Clark, to listen to,
and went to your session instead of mine;
but heard from Lester Faigely I did fine;
and Carolyn Miller said I passed the nervous test.
But that's all right: Dad always liked Greg best.)

Hit it, Muse, but not of constant heat or rain,
but rather blue skies over lush terrain;
not of small bunks in hot brick dorms,
but of eloquent papers and Ideal Forms;
not of plastic fans that push the heat,
but of morning sessions short and sweet.
Sing no more of wars and numbered sorties,
but of Kolln Vineyards' Wine and Cheese parties,
of when the Allegheny String Band swings,
reluctant dancers square off, cool damp mountains ring
with embarrassed laughter and drunken light
that travel deep into the Appalachian night.

[stanza break]

Sing me Muse, a Penn State Conference song.

Come on Muse, you take too long!

I haven't got all day to play;

I've got to write two books today!

Come on Muse, you drive me crazy!

(If Virgil only knew you were so lazy.)

Get your Registration Folder: speakers, places,

special events—the party at Mountain Acres!

Who'll forget those vicious games of volleyball

(to win against Odell you must be ten feet tall),

or that chicken barbecued, on paper plates—

greasy fingers grabbing seconds—better not be late.

Ditto registration coffee, Burrowes Building—

(those donuts are always tempting, filling).

Don't forget breakfast in the Dining Hall

(by the time I wake there there's nothing left at all).

Don't miss the plenary sessions—used to be held

in Sparks 121, where featured speakers tell

of thoughts and theories new and old

(subjects appropriate for this pseudo-ode).

Or spend your money at the Art Fair or Svboda's,

or go into town with Nittany students and get loaded.

[stanza break]

Now sing me Muse, of people in this throng
of noted teachers, theorists, scholars, among
whom sit some of my closest colleagues, friends:
Let's hope this ode spells not that friendship's end.
O sing me Muse (O please don't let me down).
I haven't washed in rose water, worn a gown.
I'll take any Muse, any Muse at all
who will come down now into this stately hall.

Sing not of Anne Herrington's arrest,
or of the handcuffs tight around her wrists.
That was the night that Anne, Debs, and I
temporarily got lost on the drive
home, turned up a one way street, got stopped—
campus security thought Anne was popped.
They made us touch our nose and walk the line;
Anne thought the worse would be a fine.
But they dragged us to the police station,
thought us students on vacation,
didn't believe that Anne was faculty
(I suppose they thought she stole her I.D.).
They made her take a breathalyzer test;

under pressure, Anne was at her best.

Of course she was not drunk, just tired;

good thing her license hadn't yet expired!

(That was the night of the Beta Theta Pi party,

when Anne and Chuckie Bazerman danced watuzzi.)

Sing not the time Chuckie and I

argued Susan Peck McDonald

about the epistemic death of objectivity at McDonalds.

(Actually it wasn't McDonalds, but Svobodas;

I needed the rhyme to make my quota.)

Sing not of Andrea Lunsford's midnight shower:

the wind blew, the door assumed its power—

locked. She wandered hours round the parking lot

with nothing but a towel (good thing it was so hot),

until she found an undergraduate

who lent her pillow, sweatshirt, and some pants

until morning, when she could call security

(from what I have seen, they aren't too friendly).

Sing not the time Mike Carter tried to reconcile

the cognitive psych and social-epistemic styles,

and was attacked from both sides of the aisle.

Sing not of when Carolyn Miller was designated—

to pick up Steven Toulmin in a motel situated
out of town—because of her father's parking permit
(he is Professor Emeritus),
a Volvo wagon twenty years of age—
a grimy pickup truck to chauffeur such a noted sage.

Wait a minute, Muse, this is not the roast;
What I had in mind was something like a toast.
Sing of all those papers on the dock
that ran over on the session clock...
No, Muse, no; that's not right either!
Let's switch to other scenes, and sweeter.
Of great papers echoing down the halls
of Willard, like names of the ancient ones along the walls
of Burrowes and Sparks, that line the Mall
like a courtyard framed by famous faces
(who cares if they are in disgraces?).
But don't bring up the topic of the Great Books—
you, dear Muse, will get some dirty looks.
Hirsch and Bloom and D'Souza wreak destruction.
You've never heard of cultural literacy, deconstruction?
I must say Muse, you're out of date;
but come on Muse, don't make me late.)

[stanza break]

Sing of Peter Elbow turning into Walter Ong,
for which metamorphosis he won a Braddock Award;
how in "Shifting Relations Between Speech and Writing"
(the presentation paper I am citing)
Elbow overturned traditional relations
for which he should receive standing ovations.
Sing of Wayne Booth's "Writing is the Making of Realities"
(rhetoricians, Muse, don't deal in trivialities!)
How about Kinneavy's "The Premature Announcement
of the Death of the Modes"?
(I'm glad he didn't address the death of odes.)
Halloran's "Neo and New Rhetorics of the Twentieth Century"
was a forensic act of generative history.
And Corder's "Getting Rhetoric and Literature in the Same
Room Together
After all, without Serious Harm to Either"
was an epideictic mouthful;
the lion lies down with the lamb in the academic zoo.
I picked these titles for their rhyme or their iambic,
not to be tendentious or pedantic.
Of course, my own "Ciceronian Poet in a Technological Society"
ranks right at the top in the hierarchy

of bloated, pompous, self-inflated paper titles.

If style is ethos, why fight it?

That's it, my Muse, that's all you've got?

No more papers? Sung out? Stuck?

Nobody talked about Demosthenes

who filled his mouth with pebbles by the sea

to practice elocution—can it be taught?

You, Muse, should fill your mouth with rocks.

You give me almost nothing here

for good times, or festive cheer—

no no, their tenth anniversary, my dear—

weren't you even listening?

If you'd stand still, stop fidgeting!

(O! I forgot whose muse you are—or were;

a Muse assumes the mannerisms of the poet whom it serves.)

And just listen to that meter!

How can I repeat her?

And now, that I'm almost out of time,

you throw me a feminine rhyme!

This is not a noble Grecian urn;

from that shapely form you took a turn;

these humble mock heroic couplets

[no stanza break]

aren't even always five foot duplets.

So as the tenure clock winds down,
sing me, Muse, into the ground.

Thanks a lot for nothing; you screwed me up again.

You might as well retire; I throw down my pen.

It seems your only trollop trope of dubious intentions,
and this a series of poor rhetorical inventions
designed to titillate the folks at this convention.

I take my hemlock slow and on the rocks.

When you bury me be careful with my locks.

(I'll only pause to straighten up my socks.)

O Muse, this is an ode, and not an elegy.

Control yourself, and act accordingly.

Weep not your poet laureate who is dead;
just think, remember what it was he said;
and laugh a little—but not too hard, or much—
and be glad he's dead—this ode's a bust.

But understand, don't get me wrong:

the good, the true, the beautiful are not gone;
though everything she said is not a lie,

[no stanza break]

the muse lives on among us, as a spy
for other camps who wait to swamp the gate;
so for the cocktail hour let's not be late.
For the Penn State Conference sing a song,
that it may grow and prosper long.