From Stanford to the University of Limerick: The Genesis of *How I Write, Ireland*

It is said that imitation is the most sincere form of flattery. With the *How I Write, Ireland* series of interviews, the Regional Writing Centre pays tribute to the *How I Write* interviews held at Stanford's Hume Writing Center as part of that university's Program in Writing and Rhetoric. Co-funded by the Stanford's Continuing Studies program and the Hume Writing Center, interviews at Stanford are conducted by author and lecturer Hilton Obenzinger, recorded, transcribed and now uploaded onto Stanford iTunes: http://itunes.apple.com/itunes-u/how-i-write/id385404247. Obenzinger is advertised as inquiring into writers' "habits, idiosyncrasies, techniques, trade secrets, hidden anxieties, and delights."

At the University of Limerick's Regional Writing Centre, we see Obenzinger's work as not only an important contribution to a crucially necessary, ongoing conversation on writing, but also an extension of two ancient traditions in a rhetorical pedagogy: analysis and imitation. "Students can learn an art by imitating the example of people who are good at it", explains Sharon Crowley, Professor Emeritus of Rhetoric and Composition in the Arizona State University Department of English, "...but the examples set by outstanding models can be made clearer if we study with a coach or teacher."[1] Augustine, however, would have debated the importance of rules. "We know numbers who, without acquaintance with rhetorical rules, are more eloquent than many who have learnt these", says Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana*, "but we know no one who is eloquent without having read and listened to the speeches and debates of eloquent men."[2] Whatever stand one takes on this issue, the fact remains: from the time of the Sophists, students of oration and writing would analyse the rhetorical strategies of great orators and writers in order to emulate those strategies in their own writing. Analysis and imitation went hand in hand. Students of great orators and writers would identify various elements in the speeches and texts of those they admired, then analyse how those elements worked in the contexts in which the authors used them. Imitation was not mere plagiarism, but a synthesis of all they discovered through analysis and an application of those same elements as they applied to a new context, a practice Petras Remus (1515-1572) referred to as 'genesis'[3], the making of something new.

The *How I Write, Ireland* interviews provide material for analysis, synthesis and imitation. Instead of analysing texts for elements of eloquence, clarity or persuasion, here student writers are invited to listen to successful, highly valued writers talk about their research and writing processes and practices. In *How I Write, Ireland* interviews, writers are not asked about *what* they write, but *how* they write-about all they do to achieve their writing goals. By coming to understand the processes and practices of valued writers, it is hoped that developing writers at all levels will form a basis from which they can analyse their own processes and practices, thereby giving them a more systematic approach for distinguishing processes and practices that are working from those that are not. Also, by listening to the practices that are working for successful writers, it is hoped that student writers will adopt some of the practices that they hear about in the interviews, adapting those practices to their own personality, personal predilections, and individual ways of learning and operating in order to form a new, healthier, more successful process.

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[1] Crowley, Sharon and Hawhee, Debra. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004, 354. Print.

[2] St. Augustine of Hippo. "Book IV." *On Christian Doctrine*. 1885. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series 1. 11 July 2011. Web.

[3] Sellberg, Erland, "Petrus Ramus", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2008. Ed.* Edward N. Zalta. 11 July 2011. Web.