

Stan Persky / WRITINGS

TOPIC SENTENCE

We were forced to make 'outlines' in school. When? Grammar school? As early as that? I can't remember any specific teacher at the moment from either elementary or high school who required the outlines. But I feel the importance. I've hit something. The subject here is the painful emergence of an organization of sentences — they wanted to teach us — as they the teachers had been taught, in places as lousy as the Education Faculty, no doubt — my aunt Paddy? — to teach us the students (I wish I had a more definite age for us, between 8 and 14? No, later than 8. After the time when we could understand an idea like 'science'. That would be after 6th grade.

I'm preparing an essay for Mrs. Barry, the 6th or 7th grade science teacher at Sumner school. It's on nuclear something or other. Atomic energy. Lester. There's someone named Lester. No, can't get it. Lester has the same or a similar relation to me then as George Stanley does now is why he's here.

It was 14 pages long, double-spaced, one side, in ink, large handwriting, maybe even devising a way of leaving the bottom *two* lines of the paper blank to intentionally increase its 'length' which is vaguely connected to showing that you 'really worked' on it. A drawing of an 'atom', intersecting distorted ovals, without understanding a thing about 'atomic energy' (nor presumably did Mrs. Barry), just that 10 years after dropping the atomic bomb it was

exactly what American 8th graders properly wrote about which was apparently the main thing I had figured out.

The 'topic'. Stuck. The idea of 'topic' strikes me. I had to learn that, too. Stick to the topic. I had to learn what a topic was in order to stick to it. Eureka! Someone in the world had invented the following item:

In each paragraph there is one topic sentence. Locate it and underline it. Underline the fucking topic sentence. I can't remember what I looked like. There's a hiatus between the utterly gorgeous 4-year old photo of myself in a sailor costume on the piano mantel (my mother wanted the damn spinet) and the later photo, also in a sailor suit, on top of the same piano — did I again dream of re-enlisting a couple nights ago — taken somewhere around my discharge from the navy or possibly 'graduation' from Boot Camp — if I'm continually experiencing 'falseness' on my part, such that I think there is a madness here, is it possible the madness is also false, merely an organization of thoughts and feelings called madness that protects me from a really terrifying chaos underneath. Somewhere in my childhood I must have been told, you're making a big fuss over nothing. I have to wildly exaggerate any feeling I have in order to get it up through me (layers of fatty tissue?) outside into the world so that contact will be established with another human being (Brian).

I'll have to get back to my mother and the piano sometime — I can almost hear my cousin Sherwin's strains of *Melaguena* (I hope I've spelled it right) rising in their living room, larger than ours, the importance of the size is simply that it is the actual display of the superiority of their social status over us as the poorer segment of the family — his back to us, my mother and his mother, my aunt Rose, sitting on the sofa, where was I enduring it — I'd like to drag by the scruff of the neck that woman who taught me composition and make her find the fucking topic sentence in this scrawl. Underline it! Find it and underline it, damn you.

Let me push aside this whole thing of the piano playing relatives, the room, the status — no, I can't — the life-giving details breathe it — the stiffness of his hands (Sherwin's — I won't go into the whole relationship with him) as he strikes large chords in certain impassioned moments of *Melaguena* — I'm trying to get a sense of my mother's emotions during these scenes — I mean, I'm imagining myself as her, feeling a great deal of pleasure listening to her nephew Sherwin

— largely I remember being socially required to visit him after he had contracted colitis — now the strapping father of four children and getting rich in the accounting, slum management and assorted real-estate holdings business — having to sit at a great distance — the size of the place — across the room from his agonized bowels to decrease the discomfort of the visitor forced to endure the enormous foul gaseous effusions of his intestines, monster farts, and didn't he get the hysterical stomach (Derek Sanderson, he-man and womanizer formerly of the Boston Bruins had it one season) — didn't he get it precisely from being trotted out x-million number of times to that Steinway Baby Grand (the magnitude of that phrase — Steinway Baby Grand — in terms of goals and striving of various upper middle class Chicago Jewish families of the 1950's — my aunt Lilly ten, twenty years later shrieking at me her defence of Spiro Agnew passing before the sleeping grey face of the tv — used as an altar on the occasion of my mother's death, 1965?

One clue when you were given an utterly innocuous paragraph and required to find the topic sentence was that it was likely to be the first one, or the second sentence after the initial sentence whose decorative function was to engage the imaginary reader's 'interest' and 'attention'. I say 'imaginary reader' because although these paragraphs were purportedly lifted from real essays the only probable readers of them, now thinking about this retrospectively — at the same time as this writing is falling to pieces, sentence by sentence — were those of us looking for the topic sentence and wishing that the fucking topic sentence (possibly buried in the middle of the paragraph) could somehow, despite all, as if it were a neon sign or a drowning swimmer, signal to us so that we could underline it.

So the theory was — I finally learn the lesson that no doubt the teacher, Mrs. Somebody or other, was trying to pump into my brain, a dozen years later, half-crazed by compositional delirium — that in each ‘well-written’ (read ‘bourgeois’) paragraph (meaning, of course, ‘well-behaved’ paragraph) there is one sentence that succinctly contains the ‘main thought’, or rather, the most important thought in that paragraph: ‘What the writer is trying to get across’. In the history of contemporary alienation I have just staked a claim to a gold-mine. Therefore, all the surrounding sentences had only a decorative function, or from my point of view (and I haven’t even gotten to ‘reading comprehension’ and ‘outlines’ yet) the function of camouflaging the topic sentence in a jungle foliage as thick as the scrub we went through the night I climbed Mt. Tamalpais because I wanted to be with Mike Dodd.

The paragraphs in themselves were meaningless to us, despite the professions (I’m sure professional educators at conferences still assure each other of the value of this kind of thing today) — in short, how can a story be interesting when you know it’s been selected in the first place to increase your ‘reading skills’ — I mean, didn’t they know that we knew that we were reading not because we would be interested but because we were required to become fluent readers, I mean, if there was something interesting to read — a John R. Tunis sports novel, say, that would generate my own invention of leagues of imaginary teams, or a Walter Farley Black Stallion book, I would get it from the fucking library with the four-fingered librarian Mrs. Spiegel.

‘I’ll give you five more minutes’.

A sentence lifted out of school exams. The teacher announces there are 5 more minutes to write then papers have to be handed in, some students scrambling frantically to get answers down under the diversionary clatter of papers being passed forward, able at this moment to ask questions of the students around them, violating the rule of ‘not talking to your neighbours’ — the degrading use of that word, ‘neighbour’, to smother the actual competitiveness of the situation. I wasn’t one of the students trying to get last minute answers. Either I had it — let’s see, there was also some behavioral instruction for those who finished the test early — yes: ‘If you’re

finished then check over your answers' (thus inculcating the lesson of avoiding hubris) — or if I didn't have them, I was fatalistic. I knew that no amount of 'thinking' would produce it though once when I didn't have the answers I wrote across the test criticizing the inadequacy of the questions thus bringing, during the next period, Mr. Markowitz the medieval history teacher who was also writing historical novels which had some juicy parts inappropriate for us to even hear — thus bringing him, the one person who understood the concept of a 'story' and its relation to learning something right down into the gymnasium to actually talk it over with me, genuinely upset at the possibility that his questions were indeed, unfair.

Now, turn in your papers. No dawdling. Pass them forward, please. And *that's* — another seed of my revolutionary being?

I don't *know* if we knew that. If we knew *all* that. Probably we mainly knew we had to get it done, whatever it was at any given instant. But look, I learned composition somewhere. And I learned it *there*.

They are trying to teach us 'good organization'. As a cliché they admit that real writers don't do this. Or rather that they 'break the rules'. Perhaps the teacher is thinking of Faulkner. Their slogan was: You have to be able to follow the rules before you are allowed to break them. Somehow we were to imagine ourselves related to 'real writers' by the fact that they too had gone through this business of 'outlines' and all the other deadening devices of composition, and had even found it helpful? before becoming 'mature' enough to abandon all that. Ironically, the 'outlines' which we were to make up simply to 'help' ourselves eventually becomes a formal assignment in itself. The teacher, perhaps from reading the badly organized 'final product' (yes, an essay was called a 'final product') deductively concluded that we were failing to make an outline. Thus, we were required to 'turn in' our 'outlines' along with our essays. The final irony being that *after* I wrote an essay, I would then be faced with the further task of abstracting from it the 'outline' which had to be turned in. They thought we were mentally unable to carry in our heads an entire required essay we were going to write . . .

ARE YOU WRITING NOW

I stopped writing. I stopped writing completely then. How did it feel. How did you like it. It wasn't so bad. It wasn't so bad at all. It was a relief. Where did you feel it. Where were you relieved. I was relieved in my mind. It was really great not to feel in my mind having to write. I felt easier. It was much easier going through a day not doing that. Not thinking about doing that. Thinking about having a rest from doing that.

Did you really stop writing completely then. Did you really stop. Did anyone ask, Are you doing any writing now. Did any writers ask, Are you writing. Did you tell yourself, You're not writing now.

Yes, I stopped writing. I stopped writing as much as I could. I stopped writing completely except for journalism. I stopped writing except for journalism and that isn't really writing. I only wrote journalism and I didn't count that as writing.

Well, then, what writing doesn't count as writing. Did you really stop writing. Did you really stop affirming writing. I really stopped writing. Journalism doesn't count as writing. Did you write any letters. Does letter-writing count. Does it count as writing. Did you write any.

I really stopped writing except journalism and I didn't write any letters. I wrote to my father before I stopped writing then and I didn't count it as writing. Did you write anything else. Did you count it as writing. How does it matter to count writing as writing.

Did you write any messages. When the telephone call was for someone else I wrote down the message. I wrote down the message on little green slips of paper. Yes I can take a message, I said. Or, no, he isn't here can I take a message, I said.

What did you write. Was it good. Was your writing any good then. Did you write any numbers down to figure out what you spent. Did it add up. Did you write any notes. Did you write any call-numbers on little white slips of paper in the library. Did you use your writing to find a book. Did you write down directions without writing words at all. Were you a writer then.

When I was 19 Ron Loewinsohn wrote me that even in writing a note to the milkman one could take care in writing. Can you compare stopping writing for a week and stopping writing for 5 years. Can you say about 5 years even though you were writing that you had stopped writing. Ron Loewinsohn and I stopped writing. We stopped writing to each other. Did you have any more to write. When you stopped writing did you stop thinking about each other. Did everything stop when you stopped writing.

Can you stop writing in its tracks. Can you stop writing if it is a train coming through a tunnel at you in a movie. Can you come in a movie. I'd really like to. When I was 20 I was in New York in Times Square and there were movies. I would really like to've come in a movie.

What was playing there. What was on then. Were you doing any writing. Did you think you'd ever write again. I was in Bickford's in Times Square. Had you read about it in a novel. Had you read about Bickford's in a poem, had you read about coming in a movie in a book. Can you remember the author.

Did you hope someone would pick you up. Did you hope to come. A black man picked me up in Bickford's. Would you like to come with me.

Did you know any writers then. Were you hanging around with writers. A black man took me on the subway to Rockaway. Was Roi Jones around then. Did you see him. Was he into politics then. Had Irving Rosenthal published *Sheeper* by then. Was John Weiners down from Massachusetts. Had you read about Times Square in John Rechy's writing. Was it anything like he had written.

Have another beer the black man said before he was ready to fuck me. Did you ever think you'd write about it. Had you written to Hubert Huncke in prison yet. Was *Palante* magazine out by then.

He was an ordinary black man. He could have been a shoe salesman. He greased his cock with k.y. and was ready to fuck me. Did you do it in order to get some experience for writing. Did you write about it.

How was New York for writing then. Was this before New York poetry. How were you then. A black man picked me up in Bickford's and took me home to fuck. What do you think about it now. It's pleasant to think of myself now as an object then.

I wouldn't let myself get fucked. I was scared shitless. I wanted out. I wanted to talk my way out of it. I had done it because I had read about it. How did it all come out.

Did anybody come. Did you write a note to the milkman before you left. Did it all come out like a novel. He was an ordinary black man. He let me go. I was glad to be out of it. Did you write it off to experience. Was it a good experience anyway.

When you came to Canada did you learn to write 'fucked in the bum'. Did you keep writing 'fucked in the ass'. Did you find a way to write about it. When you stopped writing did the world stop. No, it went on.

When you stopped writing did they stop publishing your writing. Later, I got fucked in the ass.

I was walking on Market St. at night. I was 20 and picked up a kid. He didn't fuck me in the ass til later. Is there a way of writing like a train on a track. Does the moon drop beneath the trees as the train rushes past. Have you ever written any pornography. Did it give you a rush. I was fucked in the ass and it gave me a hard on. I picked him up on Market St. I was fucked in the bum.

Did you look at each other like men passing each other look when they are under the moon. Did you read that in Dante.

When you stopped writing did you sign any autographs of what you had already written. Have you ever written your name in blood.

My father rode the rails. Jack London was writing then. When you stopped writing did the world stop. No.

Is writing out of this world. Is it okay to write a book of portraits about writers. Where do you put your father and the trains and the moon and communism.

Can I raise the level of struggle. Can writing help.

How did he look when he finished fucking you. Did he let you fuck him back. He was a writer. We didn't have much to say to each other. Did you feel alienated. Were you both strangers. What did you have in common.

Later, he's a Cockette. What are the Cockettes? Do they write their own material. They are boys dressed in gowns singing old songs and not covering their genitals. Were they written up in *Rolling Stone*. Were there any pictures. There are photographs of them like there are photographs of men drinking beer like there is a moon. Can a car get stuck on the rushing tracks in a silvery light.

Do you have any new writing. In writing is the activity of writing a metaphor for being. In writing is composition a mode of existence. Is there writing which is necessary at a particular moment in history. Is there writing which is necessary which strives to resolve the problems it engages. Is there writing which is necessary which carries its own oblivion with it. Is writing for eternity a romantic posture.

What is to be done. Is writing a part of it. Is writing a party to it. Is there a party I can be part of. There is the moon rising over the trees shining on the communist party whose heart I'm inventing in the hobo fire my father sat at the side of. I do not carry the moon into my writing lightly. It wears me down glowing on my back like a giant milky marble I collected as a kid as I stumble down the embankment of tracks into the communist party.

My father is at the fire. My actual father leaving his bloodied white apron I have tied the knot around his waist innumerable times aside to sit younger at the fire like we sat in the car to talk about where I had been and where I was going which is a way of talking about getting fucked in the ass.

Does this story have an ending that is uncomfortable like getting fucked in the ass is uncomfortable at the beginning. Is writing individual. Is reading writing to writers individual. Or do we let each other's light filter through us, moon-like. Is the moon red tonight. Is it a sailor's delight.

FATHERS & SONS

While DeBeck, who had lost his father (age 11 or so), partially, through our love, found him in me; what I didn't realize was that in my love of Brian, my father also moved. Brian as a projection of myself loving my father in me. But the issue is: now what? When my father dies I'm not responsible to anyone. There is no love outstanding. Me and Brian. But in him I see myself. In myself I see my father. He, as myself, is loving my father, played by me: equals my loving, relocating my father. Also, as my father, loving Brian, who I see as me. Apart from sons & fathers, simply Brian & me, pain, sheer fucking pain, loss. Blind drunk? No, not blind. Barely drunk, finally. The pain kills the alcohol. Russell's advice — insofar as rescuing the proverb — drink more. I can write with practically everything in me dead. Pushing a pencil. My father said that. Death? It's not very frightening when you really think about it. (This conclusion after 2 years in the morgue and a decade of everything else.) I mean it. Even tho I barely believe myself. It's true. Ok. Let those moonsheep rest their heads.

June, 1974

E.

1.

Is he still beautiful, I asked (don't know why I asked) when they brought me back. Didn't think about myself (didn't think to ask), maybe I caught myself looking in the rear-view mirror, no make-up, no mask, face still okay.

No, not as beautiful as before I was told (by the driver, who had loved him also), barely hearing, above the radio, the music. I was becoming re-accustomed to the maze of roads, traffic heavier than what I remembered. I hardly heard.

They say (after it didn't "work out") that I went back. I didn't. I simply went away from his "world", his music (can barely remember "you have entered the abyss", it's an echo now). Daughters of the moon, they said in public — that's terribly romantic, isn't it?

Hell like a big department store full of dazed consumers. I went from counter to counter. Cloth of Indian bedspreads fell against my fingers. I don't recall its famous terrors, wax museum, or the marvellous machines clanking in pits. I wasn't present in its council-chambers. Odysseus' mother at the fosse of blood. That was before my time. Perhaps after.

I didn't return. I went away. Among others. I got along.

I went with women, into the countryside. We didn't have political illusions about that. It was only for the summer. And occasionally, by a stream, listening, it seemed as though I heard a voice, moving away, singing, "Eurydice", "Eurydice". I was happy when it stopped.

2.

Even the fact of hell is his version. I saw it as a field of human action. His immortal songs outlive my front-line dispatches.

I'm simply someone in or out of hell. Object of emotion.

Of course he's the hero. He went through everything; fires, mirrors, the ends of the earth, just for me — maybe you think I got there in a taxi (this sounds like the rhythm of one of our domestic arguments; I feel embarrassed hearing my old voice break into the present). His inconsolable grief along the banks of the river that was not Lethe, etc.

I went with him only partly because others would think of me as the one brought back.

(I assure you, there were times when I felt like the cheapest groupie clinging to some star's sideman.)

Only partly because others would remember our ill-fated relationship. Mostly because *I* wanted to go there, into what is sometimes referred to as an inferno.

PHUOC BINH STATEMENT

What's relevant in poetry
is not simply a recitation of the facts, e.g.
the liberation of Phuoc Binh, January, 1975,
75 miles north of Saigon
by the Provisional Revolutionary Government
thus strengthening the hand
of the Catholic segments
in the "third force"
now arrayed in a series of
anti-corruption organizations
calling for the removal of Thieu,
as well as putting the squeeze on
the puppet regime's control
of neighbouring Tay Ninh province.
What's relevant there
is not simply that additional step taken
toward Vietnamese liberation, but
equally, the weakening of U.S. imperialism,
after all these years, that string of
American presidents I've known as intimately
as my own relatives, Kennedy,
Johnson, Nixon, and now Ford,
Rockefeller, Kissinger, the slogans
they raised — their history crosses
the awakening of my generation
who first raised the banners of
anti-imperialism *within* the belly
of Leviathan itself. Yet, even, as of
Jan., 1974, the report released

by the U.S. Senate admits that
“although American troops and military
advisers were withdrawn, *a vast army*
of civilian contractors and advisors
filled their slots; the U.S. did not
so much withdraw their troops
as it withdrew their uniforms”.

What’s relevant here is not simply the facts
but our relationship to them as
manifested in what we are doing
in our lives, at home, in factories,
in service sector jobs (what most of us
have in B.C.), receiving UIC checks,
as students, old people, women working
in the house, that the same U.S. imperialism
via Trading With The Enemy legislation
interrupts the sale of typewriters or office furniture
to Cuba, that is, anyone taken in by Trade
Minister Gillespie’s wounded & threatening
cry that this is ‘intolerable interference’
is not in a relevant relationship to
the going reality. Nor, as far as I can tell,
is current poetry in such a relevant relationship,
to put it simply
if the lovers are kissing before a window
we need to know what is seen through
that window, that there can be a dozen years
of kisses, arguments, separations, divorces,
even consciousness-raising groups in front of that window
while remaining unaware of the demonstrations, processions
of people going to work, lining up out of work,
the moon rising, that poetry must properly locate
the relationships between these things seems
imperative. (Not, repeat not, a call for topicality.)

But then, there is the special question
of duration within poetry, the real Nixon gradually dies
within the San Clemente Compound, even as Phuoc Binh
and Phnom Penh become as distant for us as Iwo Jima
and the beaches at Anzio for those that preceded us. Yet
in Dante, the poet's master, Brunetto Latini
among those other men cruising the gay ghetto
looking into each other's faces as men do
under the light of the full moon, endures
to the present, certainly we have forgotten,
even now I watch a distant teen-age boy
in orange & blue school jacket casually turn a corner
as the light drizzle dampens Larch St.,
cars crawl up the hill to 1st, the gulls wheel
almost no one passes
the test of poetry, a few old magicians
honour the art, but
my 'sour-stomached contemporaries' (as J.S. called 'em)
have not investigated the conditions sufficiently
to even be in a position to be in relevant
relationship, or so much as to attempt it,
even if only to be broken within the demands
of the creative, to at least retreat
to some clear-eyed moment
standing on the street, hands in pockets, the
awareness of, This is the world, here I am, we are,
irrespective of the more difficult act of
such location within the language as admittedly
this self-consciousness, versified, does not solve it, such that
the song is heard among our children. Amen.

January 16, 1975