Dylan performing in England in 2012. Age has added “compelling” edges and layers of meaning to the singer’s voice, Thomas says.

Jupiter’s Darling, Helen of Troy, Alexander the Great, Spartacus. “Whatever we think we are doing on such journeys,” Thomas writes, “what moves us is the sense of being at the wellspring of artistic creation, where creative genius began to form the art that would become central to our own lives and imaginations.”

Listening to Thomas talk about Dylan and his place in the firmament of classical literature, it becomes clear that this scholarship is not a sideline to his work on Virgil and Horace and Homer but an integral part of it. One reason he sees so many threads between Dylan and the ancient poets is because he considers Dylan to be one of them, an artist writing classic texts that outlast his own time. “It’s the same river,” Thomas says. “Just a different stage of it.”

---LYDIA LYN GIBSON

THE UNDERGRADUATE

Writing, Blocked

by NATASHA LASKY ’19

I’ve always said that if you want to take every class at Harvard, work at the Writing Center. Think of it as scholarship meets improv: you’re sitting in a closet of an office, alone, until random undergraduates in classes you’ve never even heard of show up with papers they want you to fix, and you have to learn as much about the subject as quickly as possible in order to properly advise them. The first year I worked there, I saw an overwhelming number of freshmen scrambling through Expos 20—the mandatory first-year academic-writing class—but I also counseled chemists on their lab reports, helped design outlines for stressed seniors polishing their theses, and even guided particularly ambitious undergraduates through their law-school applications.

I worked a 9 a.m. shift, and because early appointments are like pesticide to perennially sleep-deprived undergraduates, those who signed up for my hour tended to be miffed, frazzled—this was their last resort. So when a girl walked into my office, puffy-eyed and scowling, I initially thought she was right? Was I too stupid for this job? I looked down at my feet and tried to think of what to tell her.

“OK, maybe you’re right,” and it does make perfect sense and I just don’t get it,” I said, finally. “And it’s not like you have to change anything if you don’t want to. But I don’t really know what you want me to say, because if I didn’t give you honest criticism, I wouldn’t be doing my job.”

stained white T-shirt and running shorts, only to slam her backpack down on the ground and collapse into the gray office chair across from me.

I asked her what she wanted to work on, and she sighed. “My Expos paper, I guess,” she told me, tightening her ponytail. “To tell you the truth, I already know what I need to work on, but my preceptor told me I had to come.” Each time I asked her to explain an aspect of her paper, she would snap back with a reason why it was my fault I didn’t understand it. After about 40 minutes of this back-and-forth, she leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms, snidely mumbling, “It’s weird to me that you’re not getting the truth, I already know what I need to work on, but my preceptor told me I had to come.”

Was she right? Was I too stupid for this job? I looked down at my feet and tried to think of what to tell her.

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We sat in silence for a moment. When I looked back up at her, I saw a tear spilling down her cheek. She brushed it away with the back of her hand. “I’m so sorry,” she said, and cleared her throat. “It’s just that I don’t know if I can fix this paper. I have so much else to do.”

I reassured her that her essay didn’t need as much work as she thought it did, and she looked at me blankly; this sort of well-intentioned banality was clearly something she had already heard. But before I could say anything more, the hour was up. She had to go to class. She blinked off another tear, gave me an obligatory “Thanks,” and left the office.

As after every conference, I started filling out a report to explain how it went, but found myself merely looking at the screen. The typical questions—“Did the student feel ready to revise his or her paper?”—suddenly felt alien. It seemed as though I hadn’t helped her do anything, let alone word her thesis more precisely or delete excess adverbs.

The next time we had an all-tutor meeting, I asked my peers what to do when students come in, ostensibly to talk about their papers, only for both parties to realize that their problems have little to do with writing. I was surprised at how many of us had similar stories. As we picked at piles of popcorn on our paper napkins, we listened to each other describe experiences with students who lashed out at simple criticism, or went to the bathroom to cry, or simply refused to speak, too afraid of failing to say anything at all.

The head of the center, a preceptor in the Expos program, told us that if we’re worried about a student who comes in, we should report it to her. But when it came to the question of how we should treat our crying tutees in conference, people were more equivocal. “Don’t worry too much about it,” said one tutor. “It’s just part of the job.”

Across the table, another shook her head. “I mean, I’m not saying we shouldn’t be nice to people when they’re crying, but, at the end of the day, we’re writing tutors. We should leave therapy to the people who are trained to do it.”

If I could have sent my weeping tutee to another counseling service, the most obvious choice would have been the Bureau of Study Counsel (BSC), which targets academic issues specifically. Much of the advice offered on its website is pragmatic and good-natured, centering around easily implemented tips like making to-do lists and keeping a calendar. Elsewhere, the tone shifts. For example, the BSC counsels undergraduates having problems with their theses this way: “In an intimate relationship of any depth and duration, there is bound to be some disappointment and conflict. Those do not necessarily indicate that the relationship must end; sometimes working through a conflict or misunderstanding can lead to greater intimacy.”

Certainly there is something ridiculous about the prospect of seeking greater intimacy with a paper. But academic work is personal. I find that my friends’ emotional issues often manifest most acutely in moments of academic stress. One was gripped with such intense test anxiety that he couldn’t eat or sleep for days before he took his exams; another realized she wanted to take the semester off when she found herself paralyzed, unable to finish the final paper for her concentration.

One could call these mental-health instead of academic issues, but I wonder if this semantic distinction actually helps anyone. Allocating people’s issues to strict categories, pulling apart their “academic” and “mental health” problems as if they were Lego bricks stuck together, might be counterproductive. Embarrassing as it is to admit, I have cried about my papers so many times it’s impossible to count. When it’s 3 a.m. and I’m weeping over the fact that I still have four more paragraphs to write, I don’t know if it matters what I call my problems—I just want to be listened to.

Perhaps this is where the Writing Center comes in. There’s no prescribed relationship between tutors and the people we work with; we’re students and teachers and peer counselors simultaneously. In this way, we can mold ourselves to help students in whatever way they need, whether they’re struggling with the personal implications of what they’re writing about, cracking under the pressure of perfectionism, or wondering why they write papers at all. Not every writing center conference is so fraught. But even in conferences that deal with theses and topic sentences, I find myself spending less time with the paper itself than with the person who wrote it.

Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellow Natasha Lasky ’19 is still working at the Writing Center.