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ABSTRACT

Composition teachers need to pluralize their notions of what constitutes viable discourse to enrich their own rhetoric and to "listen" more effectively to students' writing, so that their notions of written discourse may come to reflect the rainbow of international influences that exist in the United States. A good first step would be to move beyond the causal, deterministic framework within which composition teachers now view student essay writing toward an "I-Thou" relationship where the student is encountered in the full freedom of her or his otherness. Instead of gazing at student discourse, seeing it as a product to be weighed, marked for what separates it from an ideal concept of "the Paper," and kept or thrown overboard, would it not be more profitable to keep the focus on the student paper-as-Thou--as the expressive extension of the self that Michel de Montaigne's model implies it is? (RS)

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THE "I-THOU" RELATIONSHIP,
AND THE MONTAGNIAN "ESSAI": TOWARD A MULTICULTURAL RHETORIC

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RUNNING HEAD: "The I-Thou..."

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The "I-Thou" and the True "Essai": Toward
a Multicultural Rhetoric (1)

One night a short while ago I was on the phone with a friend and fellow composition teacher. "What are you doing?" I asked. "I've been marking my students' papers," she answered. "You mean, you're reading them?" I returned, trying to tease her into seeing the implications of what she had just said. "No," she replied, "I'm sick of reading them; I'm just marking them."

Now, admittedly, it was a bit late in the night when I decided to give her a ring, and she was somewhat tired and distracted, so I'm not sure she even caught the subtleties of our exchange. But those subtleties are important, because the differences in potential action toward these students' written ideas becomes painfully distinct when one stops to think of the various uses of the two key words "mark" and "read."

We can make a "mark" in a box on tests to signal our responses, on forms to indicate our gender, on ballots to indicate our approval, on a student's paper to indicate disapproval (all to be "tallied" by various parties later); we

¹ I would like to express my special thanks to Robert Land for his invaluable help and insight. Without his encouragement this paper, and the thought that led to it, would probably not have come to fruition.

mark the spot we want to hit a ball with our nine-iron, and we "mark" someone's words; a person can be "marked for death", or "make his/her mark on the world", or bear a mark of distinction--such as a scarlet letter, or a mole--that serves to separate them from others somehow. In fact, as the examples I've just mentioned show, all "marking" constitutes an act of deferral or differentiation, something one does to someone or something else. It is unilateral and monological. Reading, on the other hand, implies an interaction; one "reads" with a view toward response. Where marking is an act of deferral, reading is an act of immediate consideration. And while reading may include acts of differentiation, it is, in its broadest sense, primarily an act of integration; that is, reading is always a tacit agreement to become an audience--which, according to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, signifies the "act of hearing," especially "attention to that which is heard" (*italics mine*). In other words, reading is an agreement to interact with the ideas that the writer is putting forth which would necessitate more than a mere "marking."

Whether my friend's riposte was meant as a joke or as a serious, albeit not completely lucid, rejoinder to my question, the undertones of our conversation were significantly symptomatic of something I've noticed too often in the teaching establishment, and in myself--the temptation to objectify students, and to disenfranchise them by choosing to consider the work they do as something other than writing. We too frequently

seem to look at student writing as the exercise of standard English grammatical rules and academic rhetorical conventions rather than as an exploration of that student's own voice and ideas. Consequently, the novice's paper becomes something to be "fixed," a series of errors to be corrected (or worse yet, merely "marked"), rather than an essai in the true, Montaignian, sense of the word: that is, an attempt or trial of a concept. As one of Michel de Montaigne's commentators, J.M. Cohen, points out, the original "meaning of the word essai, which he [Montaigne] invented as a literary term--in order to test his responses to different subjects and situations," implies "a number of trials" (Montaigne, 9; italics mine).

Montaigne himself stresses the importance of a "personal" voice in such discourse: "The style I like is a simple and natural style, the same on paper as it is in the mouth; a succulent and vigorous style...far removed from all affectation; disordered, loosely constructed, and bold...not smacking of the schoolroom, cloister, or courtroom" (In Defense of Raymond Sebond iii). These words of the father of the essay emphasize differences that separate what he does from a narrowly defined, legalistic style that, ironically, the academy (especially here in the United States) still privileges four-hundred years later. Though we may pay lip-service to part of Montaigne's formulation--that is, that the student essay should be an exploration--how often do we really encourage students to risk experimenting with papers that are "disordered" and "loosely

constructed?" Perhaps as a result of the mixed messages we send (be original, but it had better be right!) I find that, contrary to Montaigne's preferences, my students often resort to affectation out of fear of censure. I am convinced that it is greatly due to such writing anxiety, as well as inexperience, that it is so difficult to hear even traces of a genuinely personal "voice" in student papers of the kind that current theory stresses as being so important.(2)

Montaigne made his essays more personal in the process of revising them; he added anecdotes and digressions as he rewrote, which tended to add to the coherence of the text because of their parallel relation to the author's main ideas, or simply as a function of their propinquity to each other. Yet we seem to strongly discourage such non-linear rhetorical modes in most "academic" writing in America, though such a practice has much in common with deeply respected discursive traditions from other cultures, such as the folktale so prevalent in orally-based discourse communities, or the semitic prose-style--which, as Kaplan points out, tends to rely heavily on parallelism (46-47). And as researchers such as he, or Land & Whitley maintain, we

2 In an attempt to remedy this I like starting with a personal narrative as the first assignment as we do at U.C.I. Moreover, I usually try to promote the use of a "genuine" voice by "tricking" my students into it (what other options are left by the time the system has had them for twelve years?): I have them write their first drafts in the form of a letter to their best friend. But, I ask myself, should this type of trickery be necessary? The fact that students have such writing anxiety in the first place is itself an indication that something's wrong with our system.

need to recognize these other rhetorical modes as viable alternatives to our conventional ones or we risk the disenfranchisement of the rhetorical communities of immigrant and ethnic minorities from which they come, as well as the possibility of academic impoverishment that may result from refusing to learn from other cultural paradigms of expression. But there is a step precedent to that of incorporating other cultural rhetorical structures into our own, and that is acknowledging the individuals of other cultural communities as part of us. For until we do this, though they are with us they will be defined by their otherness. Michel Foucault, in the preface to his book, The Order of Things, exemplifies what I mean by the term Other when he says that

The history of madness would be the history of the Other--of that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcise the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness). (xxiv)

It seems to me that this is the way that we treat our students' discourse in general, and modes of discourse defined by other cultural modes of thought and organization. It is something other than normal human expression, something to be judged, separated, "marked" and differentiated; reading papers becomes something we do for our various institutions rather than for our students, a judging rather than a coaching, and our students thereby become chattel, manipulated for the good of those institutions.

I am not proposing that we forget about our duties to the

academy or to promoting clear rhetoric and grammar, I am just suggesting that there is a better way to serve it than to divorce ourselves from the cultural being behind the writing we read--and that is to confront the student in the paper in the full freedom of his or her otherness. To view the writing of a student only in the context of its immediate academic utility is perilous because, as Martin Buber states:

The development of the function of...using comes about mostly through decrease of man's power to enter into relations.

Taking his stand in the shelter of the primary word of separation, which holds off the I and the It from one another, he has divided his life with his fellow-men into two tidily circled-off provinces, one of institutions and the other of our feelings--the province of It and the province of I. (43)

Yet on the other hand to view someone in the fullness of their difference is also a perilous thing to most of us because it entails stepping outside the comfortable contexts of what we know, involves viewing the foucauldian "madman" within his own frame of reference, as "Thou" rather than "It". Buber explains this danger thus:

....In this chronicle of solid benefits the moments of the Thou appear as strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-tried context...in short, uncanny moments we can well dispense with. (34)

As Buber's ideas imply, to serve the student first requires that we be willing to face the uncanniness of "reading" an "Other" in the lines of student prose, to be open in other words, not to "unclear grammar," but to other rhetorical modes of expression--such as might confront us in the multicultural writing class.

This necessitates, in turn, keeping ourselves alive to the potentials of the "individual" within the "paper". When we allow ourselves to slip into patterns of thought like those I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we close ourselves off to the possibility that there is really someone talking here, that this is discourse, that this student is always and already a writer. As Jack Rawlins points out in his book, The Writer's Way, we do not think of considering babies as non-speakers, but as speakers in the process of growth; yet paradoxically we treat writers differently--that is, there are those who "can" and those who "can't" (3-21).

Most of the students in my writing classes at U.C. Irvine are Vietnamese, Korean, and Cantonese and Mandarin-speaking Chinese; there are also a smaller, though significant number of Latin Americans and Afro-Americans enrolled each quarter. Typically, at least five languages are represented in any U.C.I. writing class. It seems that the temptation that I referred to earlier to see student papers as problematic products rather than exploratory processes is especially great in the multi-cultural classroom; here, in addition to being subject, as is the native English speaker, to "pre-scripted," and sometimes rather inhibiting notions of what a student-essay should be, the non-native speaker of English is likely to labor under the double burden of being accustomed to a mode of organizing his or her discourse according to rules of logic that are foreign to our conventions of "acceptability" (Kaplan, Land & Whitley).

My Asian students, for instance, are trapped in the awkward situation of being at worst adults who are infants to our language, and at best veterans of our language, but infants to its context. They are at once inside and outside of our cultural system of perceptual and rhetorical organization. My experience in the classroom and in conference has demonstrated to me time and again how ignorant I am of the types of cultural pressures brought about by their unique situation on the mental border as Asian-thinking-American or as American-thinking-Asian; I honestly think that my students themselves are often confused as to where they lie in relation to this border. One tormented Korean woman tried to explain to me in my office that her paper remained unfinished because of a strange personal tragedy: she had come home to find all of her effects gone--burglarized by her own mother who, it turned out, objected to her dating a non-Korean. The whole system of thought that allowed the mother of a twenty-year old woman to break, enter, and ransack her daughter's residence was beyond me. And though my student understood her mother's actions in the context of Korean cultural values, as an American she felt violated.

On another occasion, in reading the paper of a Vietnamese student of mine, I found myself getting frustrated with the lack of transitional statements in her prose. In complaining of this apparent problem to my colleague, Bob Land, we both came to realize that though her essay--which made heavy use of narrative elements--had no transitional statements, per se, it did have a

definite transitional device: it used the repeated sound of a gong to signal the movement from one set of ideas to the next. In a sense this was appropriate, since the paper's structure reflected its topic, which was the discussion of an almost ineffable epiphany she had had while meditating at a Buddhist monastery, an experience which felt to her at once universal and yet beyond, or between, the bounds of language.

I agree with the proposals of Land & Whitley, and of others who claim that we need to pluralize our notions of what constitutes viable discourse, in order to enrich our own rhetoric, to "listen" more effectively to students' writing, and so that our notions of written discourse may come to reflect the rainbow of international influences that exist in our country. A good first step in doing so would be to move beyond the causal, deterministic framework within which we now view such student writing toward an "I-Thou" relationship where the student is encountered in the full freedom of her or his otherness. Instead of gazing at student discourse, seeing it as a product to be weighed, marked for what separates it from our ideal concept of "the Paper," and kept or thrown overboard, wouldn't it be more profitable to keep our focus on the student paper-as-Thou--as the expressive extension of the self that Montaigne's model implies it is? For writing is, as any experienced writer knows, not just an effort to reveal something to an audience, but simultaneously a dialogue with the self. In thinking of the paper in terms of "Thou" rather than "It" we may more effectively encourage this

dimension of writing, and thus foster a greater depth of learning.

To go back to my own experience in teaching English Composition to speakers of other languages, it seems that too often, in treating non-native speakers' papers as exercises rather than as argument, as a mechanical demonstration of Anglo-American rhetorical conventions rather than as an essai at communicating a personal position, we risk objectifying our students and thereby enervating the learning/teaching process. For when knowledge of a human being is based on his or her past, an "I-It" relationship is established, one in which there is no present but only a past based upon what the speaker of another discourse has been, rather than what he or she is. This, as Martin Buber points out, leads to a pseudo-listening situation where, though the audience pretends to "listen," they hear only that which is determined by their preconceptions concerning the nature of the speaker. What is needed instead is a clear commitment to the student that includes consideration of that "otherness," of the Korean in the Korean-American, of the "youngness" in the young-adult, of the "beginner" in the beginning writer. As Martin Buber puts it:

In order to help the realization of the best potentialities in the student's life the teacher must...not know him as a mere sum of qualities, strivings and inhibitions, he must be aware of him as a whole being and affirm him in this wholeness. But he can only do this if he meets him again and again as his partner in a bipolar situation. And in order that his effect upon him may be an ordered and significant one he must also live this situation, again and again, in all its moments not merely from his own end but also

from that of his partner: he must practice the kind of realization which I call inclusion (Umfassung). (132)

Such notions of not "teaching at" a student but of trying to work with him or her from his or her own ground are, as is probably clear by this point, not really new. In addition to supporting my arguments with the thoughts of the early twentieth-century theologian and philosopher Martin Buber, I have also harkened back to the sixteenth century thinker Michel de Montaigne. In his essay, "On the Education of Children," the latter philosopher declared that educators should "spare the rod," focus less on teaching mechanics and on rote memorization, and instead try to entice students into an engagement with broad philosophical concepts which would provide context for mechanical precepts and raw information: "there is nothing like tempting the appetite and the interest; otherwise we shall produce only book-laden asses. With strokes of the birch we put a pocketful of learning into our pupils' keeping. But if it is to be of any use....It should be indissolubly welded to the mind..." by a process that does not rely primarily on "rules," "whipping," or "tears" (86), but on a process of "invitation" (72-73).

Such models as Buber and Montaigne set forth urge more than that we modern teachers should be a "kinder, gentler" group; they imply that we should be more open-minded to students' modes of discourse; that we remain conscious of the importance of our role as guides and mentors rather than pedagogues; that we remember to approach the writing of students--and especially that originating in alternate rhetorical communities--as attempts to

explore, not as things to be marked for error. This would allow a situation of genuine listening to flourish between our students and us--a type of listening which does not know ahead of time what it will hear, but which, in the full uniqueness of the present listens to the discourse of the other without filtering what it hears through the screen of ethno-centric prejudgments or overly narrow rhetorical biases.

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