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ABSTRACT

In a recent debate on authority in the discourse of English Studies scholarship, writers seem to line up on two sides: the "friends of the familiar essay," and those who advocate "the article." The essay/article debate seems to be part of the conflict opened by the Renaissance over writing, selfhood, power, and knowledge. What historical conditions produced the essay as a genre of discourse? Europe of the 16th and 17th centuries may be characterized as a time of change, impacted by scientific, geographical, and cultural discoveries. Similarly, for postmodern thinkers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, the present condition is one of liminality or uncertainty, signalled by a revolution in language, forms of representation, and art. While scholars should applaud Derek Owens' critique of static writing conventions, they should nevertheless note that he is returning to the lyric poetry of a well-wrought urn that privileges the modernist notion of the individual writer and monologic closure. Rather than reform current conceptions, might it not be possible to consider new paradigms for analyzing and producing authority in the discourse of English studies, a paradigm based in historical conditions? James Boyd White views George Herbert as a constructor of dialoguing voices. Dialogics may provide the key for the modern essay. By bringing together textual voices as person-ideas, the dialogic essayist recreates the situatedness of positions in productive ways, thereby constructing authority in the performance of the relations. (Contains 14 references.) (TB)

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Author as Dialogic Site:
A Spatial Metaphor for Authoritative Voice

This past year, CCC has published several issues that include debates on authority in the discourse of English Studies scholarship. The writers seem to line up on two sides: the "friends of the familiar essay," and those who advocate "the Article" (Harvey 643). Much as Don Bialostosky did with the Bartholomae/Elbow debate, I would call the essay/article debate and the discussion of authority in discourse part of the conflict opened by the Renaissance over writing, selfhood, power, and knowledge. In response, with Bialostosky, I would resituate the debate in a historical context in order to "open its terms for inquiry and to identify possible resources for conducting that inquiry" ("Romantic Resonances" 93).

First, what were the historical conditions that produced the essay as a genre of discourse? I will characterize Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a time of change, impacted by scientific, geographical, and cultural discoveries. The resulting philosophy involved skepticism toward traditional explanations about "reality," i.e. the paradigms of Aristotle, scholasticism, and the Church. Rather, the new paradigm was one of discovery, or exploration. This new mode of thought found expression in the essay.

With such a new place to explore, the Renaissance essayist began to develop his own purpose and style for the genre. Bacon, for example, sought for an application of knowledge toward civic action; Donne searched for knowledge in historical research; Browne developed the essay as a

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means of self-discovery (Hall 83-88). To reach their goals, however, the Essayists did share common methods of inquiry: 1) critique of human knowledge systems as limited; 2) representation of a mode of thinking about a topic; 3) motive of discovering new ideas; and 4) frequent bringing together of disparate material related to the topic. The use of these methods of inquiry provided the initial forms of authority.

If we move to our present historical context, examining the context of the debate centering around the essay, we will see that the essay as a genre constructs authority appropriate for the Postmodern era in which we find ourselves. Jean-Francois Lyotard's seminal text *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* discusses the technological and scientific movement of Postmodernism. Lyotard summarizes the effect of the paradigm shift:

Postmodern science . . . is changing the meaning of the word *knowledge*, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known, but the unknown. (60)

For Lyotard, the Postmodern condition is one of liminality, or uncertainty, signalled by a revolution in language, forms of representation, and art. For him, the old systems of knowledge, especially representational systems of legitimation have become problematic, being replaced with language games of probability and possibility.

Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, in *Postmodern Education*, provide their own idea of how to define this contemporary movement:

[Postmodernism] signals a shift toward a set of social conditions that are reconstituting the social, cultural, and geopolitical map of the world, while simultaneously producing new forms of cultural criticism. (63)

With their cultural understanding of Postmodernism, Aronowitz and Giroux have given us further qualities to consider: decentering of power, new forms of production, and critiques of cultural systems.

Jumping into the discussion is Lester Faigley, whose award-winning *Fragments of Rationality* provides a Postmodern definition dealing with artistic and textual issues. Postmodern theory, as Faigley represents it, views the subject as a linguistically constructed entity. Faigley states that "any human action does not arise out of a unified consciousness but rather from a momentary identity that is always multiple and in some respects incoherent" (9). The self is now viewed as a point of intersection between languages or discourse, historically contingent in its make-up. Lyotard argues similarly, employing a technological metaphor, when he writes

each [self] exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever [A] person is always located at "nodal points" of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. (15)

I must qualify that I am not positing a disembodied universal self-- I have heard the voices of feminists such as Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie, who use the term "politics of location" to discuss contextualized and embodied knowledge, and define the "personal" as a locating of our speaking and thinking with a particular material body. So we've found several further qualities of Postmodernism: consciousness is linguistic, knowledge is historically contingent, and knowledge is situated in a material body.

To integrate these different textual voices into a Postmodern position, I would say that the aspect of the Postmodern era I'm concerned with is the critique of totalizing representational systems of nature, society, and the self in favor of the decentralized production of provisional

knowledge in historically situated material bodies (physical and textual) through linguistic interaction. Such an understanding provides a framework for understanding the self as a site of knowledge production through the interaction of discourse. Bringing this Postmodern notion together with our earlier position on the Essay genre, I would like to accentuate the final aspect, the frequent bringing together of disparate elements related to the topic. In the current situation, the linguistic intersection of voices could qualify as a convention of authority. Thus, our historical moment would seem to warrant a spatial metaphor of authority over the modernist's linear conception.

If we move to the specific context of the debate over authority, we find recent publications on academic discourse by several rhetoric/composition scholars continuing in the modernist paradigm. Two representative scholars--Derek Owens and Susan Peck MacDonald--provide us with theories and methodologies for considering the current understanding of authority in English disciplinary discourse. Yet they continue to privilege authority constituted as linear, dialectical reasoning resulting in monologic closure, both in the texts considered and the methodology employed in analysis.

Owens asks what characterizes current academic discourse in *Resisting Writings (and the Boundaries of Composition)*. He answers this query by providing a fairly comprehensive list of conventions of the academic essay, including items such as linear progression, orderly and incremental dialectic, and obligatory citations (29). In response, Owens argues for the inclusion of other conventions (drawn particularly from poetics) such as alliteration, metrical stress, and pacing (29). While I applaud his critique of static conventions, I see him returning to the lyric

poetry of a well-wrought urn that privileges the modernist notion of the individual writer and monologic closure. His critique is of the exclusion of other, poetic qualities, not of the privileging of included rhetorical qualities. Similarly, MacDonald, in her study *Professional Academic Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, provides ample information for discussion of what constitutes authority in English discourse. While MacDonald seems to be writing in the mode of description rather than prescription, I question the assumptions about methodology and classificatory schemes. For her part, MacDonald acknowledges the problem of rationalism and progress, and qualifies the definition with statements such as “[e]ven in a non-foundationalist, constructivist view of inquiry, however, there is room for a more modest, contingent, relative view of both rationality and progress” (27). Yet, I fail to see how her revised conceptions of rationality and progress move beyond the modernist boundaries.

Rather than reform current conceptions, might we consider a new paradigm for analyzing and producing authority in the discourse of English studies, a paradigm based in historical conditions? I have seen the discussion of authority and the conventions of English discourse swinging back and forth from Aristotelian rhetoric to a poetics, two systems that entail particular understandings of authority. What would have happened if William of Baskerville had saved Aristotle’s comedy in *The Name of the Rose*? Is there such a comedic, or even a prosaic voice to respond to our dialogue?

Indeed, several scholars have begun to articulate new methods for understanding texts based on shifts in literary and composition theory. One such scholar, present here as respondent, is James Boyd White. In his

most recent book, *"This Book of Starres": Learning to Read George Herbert*, White records his "engagement with the poetry of George Herbert," an experience he claims is "closest to . . . travel" (xv). In speaking of Herbert's collection *The Temple*, White views the author as the constructor of a site of dialoguing voices. By reading poems in light of one another, White argues that Herbert's poems acquire meaning from their relations and interactions with each other, as one poem answers, builds upon, or recalls another (67). In terms of authority, White implies that authority comes from imagined identities and relations, with the author becoming a sort of editor of the site of linguistic dialogue:

A field of [X] and [Y] is thus two inconsistent things at once: a screen on which an individual projects his or her own internal drama; and the source of many of the terms and feelings in which that drama is defined, a source indeed of that individual identity itself. (193)

Authority, then, comes through the construction and editing of the text as a dialogic site of voices, which for Herbert consisted of poems. Could we not translate this Herbertian method for establishing and understanding authority to academic writing? Derek Owens writes of such an editorial voice as he looks at current collections of texts. For him, the editor/collector has a shadow appearance in the choice of texts, an appearance that is textually present in the preface and intertextual remarks (33). Perhaps we are beginning to recognize the Postmodern paradigm after all.

Both of these methodologies reframe the question of authority similarly to Dialogics, Novelistics, or what Caryl Emerson and Gary Morson call a "Prosaics" based on the work of the Bakhtin circle. In "Towards a

Methodology for the Human Sciences,” Mikhail Bakhtin presents a model for our discipline that relies on a spatial metaphor of authority. He calls the humanites a dialogic form of understanding (161), wherein, “[o]nly at the point of contact between texts does a light flash, . . . joining a given text to a dialogue. . . . Behind this contact is a contact of personalities and not of things” (162). Bakhtin’s discusses his conception of personality in *The Problem of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*, interpreting Dostoyevsky’s characters as ideologic persons, voicing ideas that are themselves texts (91). For him, understanding is historical and personal, in that the author is the “bearer of others’ words” (163). Yet the author is not a colonizer, but attempts a “surmounting of the otherness of the other without transforming him (sic) into purely one’s own” (169). The authority of the text results from its answerability to the environment of intersecting voices around the topic under consideration.

Bakhtin’s Prosaics (I’m tending to like “Novelistics” even more) has affinity with the late Italian Renaissance’s discussions of dialogic writing as articulated in Jon Snyder’s *Writing the Scene of Speaking*. For theorists such as Sperone Speroni and Carlo Signonio, dialogic writing presents the scene of speaking, an intersubjective exchange of phrases, ideas, and perspectives. Authority for these gentlemen results from the performance of the dialogue; indeed, their theoretical texts involved an interplay of philosophy, performance, strategy, and rhetoric that mapped out their position on dialogue at that time (6). Postmodernist Michel De Certeau would recommend such a form of analysis that provides a “field of operations within which theory is itself produced . . . a theory which is the literary gesture of these procedures themselves” (192). Should we

reconsider these geneological precursors to Bakhtin, precursors who were marginalized by the monologic force of scientific rationalism?

There is a current voice advocating dialogic changes. In a 1986 *PMLA*, Don Bialostosky wrote about the Dialogic Essay as an art of discourse in English Studies. Such an essay, as defined by Bialostosky, brings together several textual voices around a specific topic in order to position the self within the field through the dialogic interaction of language. The text, then, becomes the momentary inscription of the self as situated knowledge. The authority constructed by such an essay resides in the answerability of the text, much as Bakhtin advocated above.

Dialogics, then, provides the key for the authority of the Essay. As Bialostosky states, "Dialogics concerns the relations among persons articulating their ideas in response to one another, discovering their mutual affinities and oppositions, their provocations to reply, their desires to hear more, or their wishes to change the subject" (789). By bringing together textual voices as person-ideas, the dialogic essayist recreates the situatedness of positions in productive ways, thereby constructing authority in the performance of the relations.

In conclusion, there are many benefits to such a genre. With a dialogic understanding of how texts embody ideas, professional writers, scholars, and students could open up possibilities and conflicts within texts they read, points where the dialogues stabilize or discursive voices are suppressed. Resulting texts would continue the dialogue, adding new perspectives and possibilities to the subject through a repositioning of ideological voices in unanticipated dialogues. In writing a dialogic text, the writer's authority would not result from linearity, dialectics, or name-dropping, but from a consideration of intersections between positions

around the topic for the purpose of further dialogue. Through its use and development, the dialogic essay reveals and realizes authority as the production of knowledge through the dialogic force of language. I hope to hear your productive voices in the symposium of the essay.

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