

Salvaging the Subject: Restoring Voice in Writing Pedagogy

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“Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

During my first semester as a composition instructor at the small southern school where I was then completing my Master’s, I was asked by a student, after an introduction to the final research unit, whether it was necessary to believe in the argument one puts forth. Surprised, I muttered something to the effect that persuasive argument is not necessarily a function of personal conviction, that, hypothetically, a rhetorically cogent essay could be written about even the most universally vilified of topics—a defense of child abuse, for example, or a treatise on world domination.

Though today I don’t remember the student’s exact response (I suspect I gave him precisely what he was fishing for), I remember very well the uneasiness the conversation provoked in me. I felt as if I had been tricked into endorsing a kind of nihilism, a game-like system free from the constraints of ethics in which sophisticated sleight of hand would always win out over impassioned, embodied prose. This game surely exists within the academy, and it is

especially familiar to graduate students, who, in order to publish and gain a foothold in the “market,” often seek out and attempt to fill perceived gaps within a given body of scholarship. Such ventures may lead to, for example, postcolonial readings of *Beowulf* and posthumanist analyses of Voltaire. My point is not that such studies are unnecessary or frivolous—indeed, in many cases work of this kind seems not only warranted but urgently needed—but rather that the impetus behind such projects seems to be misguided. Like my student, who was willing to sacrifice his voice in order to better suit what he perceived to be needs of the class (and presumably, his instructor), graduate students too often feel pressure to relinquish or postpone the scholarly pursuits they care about in order to advance in the academy. In such cases, the writer’s subjectivity is undercut, cancelled, and rhetoric becomes an end in itself, its own reward. The discursive world here created is not one populated by devil’s advocates, as one might think, but rather one populated by advocates for no one in particular—for an institution perhaps, or worse still, for a market.

The kind of writing I am describing here is fostered by academic discourse, which, as Peter Elbow has persuasively argued, “tries to peel away from messages the evidence of how those messages are situated as the center of personal, political, or cultural interest.” He goes on, “the conventions [of academic discourse] tend toward the sound of reasonable, disinterested, perhaps even objective (shall I say it?) men” (141). Thus, academic discourse asks us to bracket our subjectivity from our message, to become, in so many words, disembodied. It is no surprise, then, that students and academics alike show little reluctance advancing claims about which they

do not care. It would seem that the form of academic discourse essentially encourages a kind of intellectual irresponsibility. Elbow points out that

the very appeal of academic discourse ... tends to rest on the assumption that we can separate the ideas and reasons and arguments from the person who holds them; that there are such things as unheld opinions—assertions that exist uninfluenced by who says them and who hears them—positions not influenced by one’s feelings, class, race, gender, sexual orientation, historical position, etc.—thinking that “stands on its own two feet.”

(140)

If we have learned anything from the last century of philosophy and critical theory it is this: communication is not the unilateral process postulated by classical linguistics. Just as the receiver brings to bear his own subjectivity on the message, the message itself retains traces of the sender. Thus, there really is no such thing as an impersonal or “objective” style, and any attempt to cultivate one seems to deny communication its rightful complexity.

Of course, the appeal of academic discourse is obvious enough. David Bartholomae, with whom Elbow carried on a widely covered debate, has argued that academic discourse is a form of “critical writing,” whereby the writer is able to knowingly situate herself within a matrix of discursive forces that inform her own writing (85). To assume, as Bartholomae accuses Elbow of doing, that the writer is somehow autonomous, a creator, an “author” is a mistake. Teaching students to write under these pretensions, argues Bartholomae, is a disservice to them.

What I would like to suggest in the remainder of this column is that the disembodied style of writing which many of us continue to teach our students effectively alienates them as writers,

placing them troublingly at the margins of their own work and denying them their rightful voice in the conversation. I am not, however, arguing for a return to a pre-theory Eden, in which the author naively reassumes an unchallenged position at the center of an originary discursive space; rather, I am merely suggesting that one of our aims as teachers of writing should be to instill in our students the idea of ownership, even if it is, as Bartholomae has argued, a contested or shared ownership that must be negotiated within structures of power. In order to accomplish this, writing pedagogy needs to reflect the significance that affect and emotion play in reading and writing.

The privileging of disembodied prose stems in part from the corresponding privileging of logos. The assumption is that, like facts, logic does not lie. Logic, goes the story, is universal and transcends the limitations of subjective experience; it is pure as geometry is pure. Logic, we continue, is reducible to symbols, governed by rules, free from the constraints of language, etc. (Of course, the certainty claimed for all logic is only really true of deductive logic. As Hume pointed out, inductive logic carries no guarantee; for example, we can never know with certainty that the next crow we see will be black, like every other crow we have seen. Logic cannot guarantee us that it won't be white or purple or yellow because such a guarantee would require knowledge of the future. Socrates, on the other hand, will always be a mortal.) It seems reasonable then to privilege logos, which speaks all languages, over pathos and ethos, which are contextually bound. Within academic rhetoric, ethos and pathos are derived from logos; perceived rationality translates directly to ethos, from which, if we're lucky, we might squeeze a

couple drops of incidental pathos—here in the form of a knowing nod toward the audience’s eminent reasonableness.

As Gretchen Flesher Moon and, more recently, Tim Jensen have pointed out, this hierarchy is dutifully maintained in argument textbooks (35; par. 24). Moon’s survey of 35 textbooks led her to remark that for many of these texts, pathos is “understood to be a kind of compromise for the postlapsarian world, infinitely dangerous and detached from rational processes” (35). In a helpful update to and extension of Moon’s 2003 argument, Jensen observes that, with a few bright exceptions, more recent textbooks continue to warn students of the perils of emotional appeals (28). In reviewing several of my own favorite textbooks, a couple of which I continue to teach from, I encountered similar accounts. The author of *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*, for example, claims that “Effective arguments emphasize the appeal to reason but may also appeal to character or emotion” (Reid 446). His choice here to have “effective arguments” rather than writers perform the emphasizing is telling: this is disembodiment *par excellence*. The suggestion that arguments write themselves is nicely consonant with the idea that logic convinces in spite of she who wields it. The author has effectively written the writer out of the process of communication. In classical rhetoric—a discipline, I admit, concerned more with persuasiveness *per se* than with truth value—the three appeals are situated on more of an equal footing and are generally difficult to disentangle. In *The Prentice Hall Guide*, on the other hand, pathos and, perhaps even more surprisingly, ethos are presented as superfluous. An effective argument “may” employ ethos or pathos, but certainly doesn’t need to, the authors suggest. Another popular first year writing text, *Writing*

Analytically, is similarly mealy-mouthed in its account of pathos and ethos. Pathos is mentioned a mere three times in the text, and the most extended discussion belongs to a section on essay structure rather than on argument. The authors acknowledge that “appeals to the audience’s emotions” are common in written argument, but they qualify that such appeals occur “whether the writer wants [them] or not” (Rosenwasser and Stephen 329). The other notable mention, revealingly, makes an appearance in the authors’ discussion of logical fallacies, though, to be fair, the authors are admirably careful in pointing out that appeals to pathos aren’t always fallacious. Earlier, after admitting that the bulk of the text is “concerned with the logos of academic writing,” the authors inform us that “Ethos matters, too” (75). I haven’t decided whether the authors are merely reassuring themselves of this fact or whether they’re anticipating audiences of increasingly reasonable undergraduates. Whatever the case, it’s important to note that, per Jensen’s calculation, twenty percent of the textbooks surveyed by Moon in her landmark study did not mention pathos at all (par. 10); so, what we see in *Writing Analytically*, as scant as it is, is likely more thorough than many of its competitors.

While we can maybe understand the emphasis of logos in a title like *Writing Analytically*, the suggested scope of the *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers* makes their account of the rhetorical appeals especially troubling. It dedicates nearly three whole pages to the “appeal to reason,” whereas it allots short of a page to the “appeal to character” and an alarmingly skimpy paragraph for “appeal to emotion.” About emotion, the authors have this to say:

Appeals to emotion can be tricky because, as we have seen, when emotions come in through the door, reasonableness may fly out the window. Argument emphasizes reason,

not emotion. We know, for example, how advertising plays on emotions, by means of loaded or exaggerated language or through images of famous or sexy people. Emotional appeals designed to *deceive* or *frighten* people or to *misrepresent* the virtues of a person, place, or object have no place in rational argument. But emotional appeals that illustrate a truth or movingly depict a reality are legitimate and effective means of convincing readers. (449)

Leaving aside the dripping condescension and the puzzling use of italics (are the italicized words “key” terms? are they words the authors anticipate might confuse the reader?), this passage reflects the dominant view of how emotion is perceived in discourse. Emotion is “tricky” and evasive; one resorts to emotional appeals only when reason is not available—only, that is, when deception is necessary to persuade. Their one concession—this idea of “legitimate” emotional appeals and their capacity to “illustrate” and “depict” a truth—seems also to ring false and contrived. By importing the notion of legitimacy into the discussion, they subordinate emotion to reason; emotional appeals must be legitimate or lawful—in other words, they must be regulated by and derived from reason. Emotions, then, if they are to play by the rules, cannot really be emotions at all; that is to say, emotions must be premeditated, reflective—which is also to say, emotions must be inauthentic, contrived, the very thing the authors first discourage.

The problem with this passage is not its caution, however; they are right to warn of the exploitation of emotion. Rather, what troubles me is, first, the suggestion that emotion is at its core illegitimate, and second, that emotion is somehow separate from and foreign to the act of writing. To return once again to Hume, “Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the

passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.” The truth of this oft-cited claim is intuitive. As Nietzsche has persuasively argued, drives and passions, particularly desire, hide behind all our actions, especially our appeals to reason. Thus, our much-lauded “objectivity” is really not thinking emptied of passion but rather thinking that acknowledges the passions of others. Consider, for the sake of illustration, the scientist in search of a hypothesis: it is not reason that spurs him on, but a *desire* to know. Reason spurs no one. Rather, it is co-opted by passion, and fitted to serve its ends. Subjective feeling, emotion, passion—these color and determine our use of logic.

Moreover, as readers, it is ultimately a writer’s pathos to which we respond. By that, I am not suggesting that writers employ “emotional appeals” and it is by them that we as readers are engaged. Rather, I’m saying that we respond to the singularity of the text, the awareness that any text is composed by a thinking, feeling person or group of persons. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” would founder without the affective center represented by King’s use of pathos and ethos. His logic only confirms what we already suspect. Logos, thus, is only of use once this relationship between implied author and reader is established. This is why we bristle at overt propaganda, advertisements, and the like; we know that this basic relationship, this acknowledgement of otherness, is being exploited.

Several scholars in composition studies have addressed this problem of the writer’s relationship to his or her text. In their work, they seek to reinsert, to re-embody, the writer and reader. Drawing from feminist and pragmatist theory, Shari Stenberg has argued that emotion is a “crucial, epistemological component of rhetorical education” (351), and as such, needs to be

accounted for within our writing pedagogies. For her, emotion is primary in “knowledge production” (352). Rebecca Moore Howard has made similar strides, pointing out the shift in “the late age of print” from more logos-oriented rhetorical approaches toward more emotionally-centered rhetoric. She notes that in popular rhetoric, particularly the kinds blossoming on the Web, ethos and logos are derived from pathos, rather than the inverse (292). My quibble with her work is that she seems to suggest that the shift is merely mass culture’s response to new media: “With its fast pace of change, its permeable forms and genres, and its independence from the regulations inscribed in writer’s handbooks, the new medium causes the privileged forms of writing to shift, and those shifts, in turn, give rise to new models for writing” (293). I would suggest instead that the lack of well-defined generic norms, such as we see in academic discourse, enables the writer to embody herself within her prose. The space in which this shift occurs is really irrelevant, provided that space is not yet choked with prescriptions. What she describes and attributes to the internet could just as easily have occurred as graffiti on the walls of office buildings. Because writers intuit the significance of embodiment—and by embodiment, I mean the qualities of a style and rhetoric that imply a thinking, feeling author (humor, compassion, irony, epistemological doubt, even the dreaded use of “I”)—an embodied style is the style most natural to written discourse.

My project here is not to dislodge or discredit the rigor or sophistication of academic writing. Bartholomae is surely right when he says, “There is no better way to investigate the transmission of power, tradition and authority than by asking students to do what academics do: work with the past, with key texts; working with other’s terms ... struggling with the problems

of quotation, citation and paraphrase ...” (“Writing” 66). To shelter students from such work is no better than denying them their own voice. But again, here is the rub. It would seem, based on the terms laid out by Elbow and Bartholomae, that part of what makes academic work academic is this effacement, this muffling, this ventriloquizing of the writer’s voice. We are thus presented with a binary, with “personal” or “expressive” writing on the one hand and academic writing on the other.

Writing pedagogy should strive to collapse this binary, to reinsert the writer’s voice, even if this voice must struggle to be heard among the cacophony of other voices. The dilemma suggested by the academic/personal writing opposition is really a false one. As Elbow has pointed out, there really is no such thing as “academic writing,” if what is meant by academic writing is a writing free from personality. One can write personally without risking solipsistic isolation, just as one can write academically without forsaking his or her sense of self. As teachers, we need to emphasize the situatedness of any piece of writing, of its connection to its source, of its pedigree—even, again, if we are uncomfortable with ideologically-charged terms like author or creator. Above all, we should instill in our students the idea that they have a voice, and by not choosing to use it, whether by submitting to a genre or by hiding behind the voices of others, they miss entirely the point of writing in the first place.

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