

involved in. Joyce was a great "brainstormer," often listing words and phrases in his own form of shorthand. How he would then build upon that fragile scaffolding, revising continually, can be demonstrated to students through exposure to the succession of drafts and galley proofs).

I want to end this paper by considering how Joyce ended the writing process: with a prose of great economy and grace. By reading Joyce, and more importantly, by rewriting, re-creating Joyce in the ways I have been outlining, developing writers are doing in an unusual manner what we usually ask them to do. They are learning that writing is a process, a series of stages, no one of which can be skipped over; they are learning that a finished piece of prose must have certain characteristics, specific qualities: that to be truly finished and not just finished with, it must meet criteria with respect to diction, grammar, syntax. There is, I think, no writer in the language as grammatically fastidious, as syntactically inventive, as Joyce: no writer with a better ear for the just word, the most alluring cadence.

So the more conventional prose of *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* also offers rich material. But here it is "good writing" — tightly wrought prose — that is sought. Students can be given a piece of prose from which key words have been removed, and told to return each to its proper place, using a list of the excised words in random order. And they can be sensitized with regard to effective syntax as well as effective diction. Joyce's sentence and paragraph patterns can serve as exemplars of form, the student providing her own content. Of course, exercises like these are offered in many popular composition texts: Scholes and Comley's *The Practice of Writing*, for example. The point is that no other writer, and perhaps no group of other writers, can match Joyce for sheer variety: his stylistic range extends from extreme simplicity to arabesque complexity, from the "scrupulous meanness" of *Dubliners* to the portmanteau language of *Finnegans Wake*. In short, for the sorts of exercises I have been describing, and for many others as well, Joyce provides everything that may be needed.

Almost all of the short stories in *Dubliners* can, I think, be read and understood by students in developmental courses. At last year's Conference I read a paper on how reader-response criticism can be adapted to the needs of the developing writer. I can think of no stories that would elicit stronger emotional and deeper intellectual responses than Joyce's. Joyce isn't relevant, you say, even though he may be accessible? Think again, please. He is an urban writer who focuses upon situations characteristic of cities and city dwellers, events rooted in the environment in which they occur. Need I remind you that "Counterparts" is a case study of child abuse? That "An Encounter" is about how a young boy responds to homosexual overtures being made to him by a particularly dirty old man?

As you know, the instructions given by the CWAT examiners ask students to write from their own experience, which is, as you also know, usually pretty limited. Perhaps more than any other writer, Joyce made a lot out of a little; he wrote, copiously, from a fairly narrow range of experience, making what experience he did have count by approaching it from various perspectives and by embellishing it. Working in conjunction with Joyce in the ways I have been advocating teaches developing writers how to make the best of what they have, how to make their own experience count. Just as he focused almost obsessively upon Dublin at the turn of the century — the world he knew best, had experienced most vividly — so in their own search for content, for something to say worth saying, developing writers must also begin with "the daily bread of experience": become Joycean in

their approach to the common realities of family, neighborhood, urban society. In identifying with Joyce, one of the most important writers in the language, developing writers feel important. In following his example when they write, they convince their readers that indeed they are.

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## POST-STRUCTURALISM AND THE TEACHING OF COMPOSITION

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Recent studies have shown that the freshman English course as it was taught in American universities from the late nineteenth century until the mid 1960's took its governing assumptions and pedagogical techniques from the empiricist epistemology of the Newtonian tradition in science (Berlin, Harned). But if we wish to take a longer historical view, the current-traditional paradigm — as this cluster of assumptions and techniques has come to be known by — rests on a prior assumption about the relationship among nature, thought, and language that Jacques Derrida has shown to have structured Western philosophy and culture for three millennia. This is the view, articulated by Aristotle in *De interpretatione*, that language has only a secondary value because it imperfectly registers the concepts of the mind, which are universal and mirror nature: "Just as all men have not the same writing so all men have not the same speech sounds, but mental experiences, of which these are the primary symbols (*semeia prótos*), are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images" (quoted in *Of Grammatology* 11). Writing, in this view, is even inferior to speech since it is but a copy of the spoken word, which enjoys a more immediate, essential proximity to the mind. From this distinction between the signified (the concepts of the mind) and the signifier (language), and the parallel distinction between the spoken and written words, flows the whole of Western metaphysics with its binary, hierarchical oppositions: being vs. becoming, the intelligible vs. the sensible, essence vs. appearance, truth vs. falsehood, reason vs. insanity, nature vs. culture, and so on. In the Christian middle ages the fallen language of

man struggled to express the ineffable presence of God. In the Enlightenment language struggled to convey the concepts of the mind that in turn reflected the order of nature. And in the composition pedagogy that derived from this empiricist version of logocentrism, students learned an array of prescriptions designed to help them bring order into the chaos of their language: avoid grammatical errors, find the exact word, state a thesis in the introduction, follow standard patterns of development, begin paragraphs with a topic sentence, use transitional expressions, and so on. The chief "mode of discourse" was exposition, the explanation of things. Good writing required, above all, an appreciation of the difficulty in expressing ideas clearly and an adherence to discursive patterns believed to have universal applicability.

Derrida's analysis would suggest that the revolt against the current-traditional paradigm in the mid 1960's did not fundamentally alter our concept of writing. In advocating personal writing as the antidote to the lifeless, cliché-ridden themes of the 1950's—and to the authoritarian educational and social system that stifled individuality—Janet Emig, Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow, Robert Coles and others did bring about new ways of teaching writing. They helped discredit five-paragraph themes, outlines, the "modes of discourse," grammar and usage exercises; their students learned how to design their own topics, to produce multiple drafts, to develop an "authentic" tone and style. Yet all these teaching practices assumed that language sought to convey a reality that existed outside language itself—now the reality of the Self, thought of, as in romanticism, as an infinite creativity. Writing remained within the domain of logocentrism.

The mood of our own time is one of radical skepticism. Under suspicion are virtually all the paradigms and axiological oppositions that have traditionally arranged our lives. Nevertheless, many teachers of composition are seeking the elements of a new paradigm, and with increasing frequency they look for guidance to post-structuralism. This Continental (and largely French) enterprise is of special interest to writing theorists not only because it has mounted a vigorous challenge to our culture's traditional ways of thinking and acting, but because its leading practitioners possess an unusually subtle understanding of the way language works.<sup>1</sup> In this essay I would like to explore two alternative versions of post-structuralism—Derrida's deconstruction and Foucault's archeology—in an effort to assess the relevance of this movement to the teaching of composition.

The leverage for Derrida's subversion of Western metaphysics is provided by Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of the sign as arbitrary and conventional. Neither side of the sign—signifier and signified—is defined by essential features but by the differences that distinguish it from other signs in the same system of signs. We all pronounce the phoneme /b/ in different ways; all that is important is that this signifier sound different from our pronunciation of other phonemes, such as /p/ and /t/. Similarly a signified means not by reference to objects in the real world, as common sense would have it, but by contrast with other signifieds. Thus, to use one of Saussure's examples, in English *sheep* always carries with it the sense of contrast with *mutton*. Other languages divide up the world in different ways. French *mouton* is not interchangeable with English *sheep* since *mouton* is not defined by a corresponding contrast. In this way Saussure undermines the Aristotelian concept of the mind, the repository of signifieds, as the mirror of nature. The mind creates rather than reflects nature, determining the way nature is seen through its

linguistic categories. At the same time Saussure undermines the romantic concept of the self as source of meaning, for the language by which we view the world comes from society, not the individual.

Still, Derrida regards Saussure's argument as inconsistent and in part another instance of logocentrism since Saussure's objective is to establish semiotics as the science of deciphering and describing sign systems. The structuralists who follow him, such as Jakobson in linguistics and Lévi-Strauss in anthropology, treat the signifier as the means of access to the signified, as if they could grasp the Platonic Form through the mirage of the material world. The very distinction between signified and signifier is embedded in logocentric valorization. Deconstruction, Derrida's strategy for subverting the privileged position of the signified, denies the separation of signifier and signified: "the signified always already functions as a signifier" (*Of Grammatology* 7); there is no final resting place, no ground or reference that anchors the linguistic system in the self-presence of Being, truth, or meaning. The signifier floats free, and the process of signification is a play of differences.

In deconstruction Derrida does not combat logocentrism by simply inverting its hierarchies, bringing low what was high, but by finding an "undecidable [ ]" (*Positions* 43) that will, in the manner of a paradox, comprehend the other two elements of a hierarchy and thereby destabilize their opposition. In deconstructing the speech/writing opposition, for instance, Derrida introduces the term *différance*, which initiates a radical departure from the conventional notion of speech and writing. In the process of signification, "no element can function as a sign without reference to another element which itself is not simply present" (*Positions* 26). All texts are thus intertextual, woven from the signifiers of other texts, not copied from a transcendental, extra-semiotic model. *Différance*, a verbal noun coined by Derrida, captures the logic of this intertextuality, which is both a spatial and a temporal phenomenon, a (static) difference as well as (dynamic) deferral. The temporal quality of *différance* indicates its generative force: through the activity of differing—disagreeing with, adding to, refining, qualifying, and the like—new texts are born from old texts. The engine that drives both speaking and writing is language itself. Texts write texts, not authors or "reality."

*Différance* also reconceives reading. The structuralist notion of reading is a spatial one: we see, as if from above, all the signifiers of a text spread out before us and detect their underlying order, the signified to which all signifiers lead. But *différance* indicates that reading is a temporal process as well and thus that there is no commanding view of the text: traces lead only to other traces in an infinite referral. By its very nature as a locus of differences, a text is incoherent, divided against itself. We don't so much "understand" a text—which implies the possibility of arriving at a univocal meaning—as construct the text since there are no privileged signifiers protected from further interpretation. Any interpretation comes at the expense of other interpretations, which are equally plausible. Derrida's own readings of the great texts of Western philosophy typically focus on an aporia, a moment of undecidability in which a key word gathers together the contending signifiers on which the text is based. The word *supplément* that runs through Rousseau's texts, for instance, suspends the thematic oppositions that the texts purportedly advance. A supplement is, paradoxically, an inessential extra, something added on, and also something necessary, something to compensate for an original insufficiency. In speaking of writing as the "supplement" to speech, for instance, or of education

as a "supplement" to nature, Rousseau—or to be more precise, language itself—indicates that writing and education are secondary and at the same time something essential, necessary for the functioning of speech and nature.

Relying as they both do on *différance*, writing and reading are both forms of the same mental activity, and they are, like the axiological oppositions that Derrida deconstructs, interdependent and interanimating, one essential to the other. As J. Hillis Miller puts it, "every act of writing is an act of reading, an interpretation of the totality of what is. That totality is not a set of non-linguistic objects but a field of signs to be read, which means to have more signs added to them by the new composition" (41). Writing is not, in other words, an isolated activity that can be described or performed apart from reading, but a response to reading that in turn elicits further reading and further responses in an endless stream of signification. Deconstruction thus encourages the now familiar views in composition circles that writing is more process than product and that it is a form of discovery. It would particularly emphasize the value of revision in the composing process, the reading of one's own text as a pre-text for further writing, and it would endorse the observation of Donald M. Murray that "the maker's eye is never satisfied, for each word has the potential to ignite new meanings" (16).

As the initial writing stimulus, however, Derridean theorists tend to take issue with some current accounts of the composing process and favor less invention devices that tap memory and personal experience than reading the texts of other writers. Students will grow as writers, they maintain, not by looking within themselves, but by looking to the practice of other, more experienced writers. "There is no learning to write well without a concomitant learning to read well," Miller contends (42). Advocating reading for this purpose has a practical advantage to writing teachers since it allows them to deconstruct the literature/composition hierarchy that prevails in most English departments. And it is attractive to teachers of literature because it places the close reading of texts at the center of the composition course.

One approach that has emerged for introducing deconstructive reading/writing into freshman English is to teach students to write deconstructive interpretations of texts. Their papers would "tease out the warring forces of signification in a text," as Barbara Johnson describes the method of deconstruction (*The Critical Difference* 5), and she has, in her essay "Teaching Deconstructively," identified several kinds of aporia that students might find in a text: ambiguous words, undecidable syntax, incompatibles between the literal and figural, incompatibles between explicitly foregrounded assertions and illustrative examples, obscurity, and figural self-interpretation. Johnson uses literature for her examples, but students might also deconstruct non-literary texts. Paul Northam, for instance, unravels several essays from a freshman reader, showing how they undermine their own explicitly stated theses. David Kaufer and Gary Waller have devised a simply worded directive to elicit a deconstructive exegesis: "Find a problem in the text to write about" (77). Such an assignment, according to Kaufer and Waller, almost invariably produces on the first trial a paraphrase rather than a critical appraisal, which allows them to point out to students that they have succumbed to the author's efforts to inhibit rather than to stimulate thinking.

Students may also be asked to read texts as pre-texts for purposes other than deconstructive exegesis. In their course in persuasive writing, for instance, Kaufer and Waller tell students to

"consider your opponent in your argument" (79) and then take care to find an author who will provide a competent, credible opponent for their students. In this way the students are obliged to measure carefully the differences that separate them from their opponents and to address those differences seriously. Knowledge, instead of being one-sided and obvious, proves to be complex. Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes use poetry as the writing stimulus, either for new poems or texts in other discourse forms. One assignment, for instance, asks students to write about "Richard Cory" from Richard Cory's point of view, imagining his thoughts just before his suicide. This interpretive practice carries with it the advantage of teaching students a voice, Comley and Scholes maintain, for in their deconstructive view selfhood is achieved not through introspection or "free writing," but "by trying out different voices and learning the limit of what they can express" (103).

Before I offer an assessment of these deconstructive teaching strategies, let me first discuss for the purposes of comparison another influential, counter-structuralist project, the "new history" of Michel Foucault as it is described in *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Foucault is important to composition theory because, like Derrida, he practices a new method of textual interpretation created to discredit the prejudices of logocentrism, which he calls "anthropocentrism." The older, humanistic historian looks for continuities so as to demonstrate a unifying principle or purpose, often a movement toward greater rationality, truth, or freedom. Such history, Foucault contends, "is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject" (12). It complacently finds the present in the past and the face of the historian in the faces of those he studies. By contrast the new history affirms the essential otherness of the past, and it regards the passage of time not as an illusion behind which stand the permanent, universal laws of mankind, but as an inescapable reality.

Foucault refers to the interpretive methodology of the new history as "archeology" in order to indicate that he wishes to describe the documentary materials of history not from without, deciphering the human voice and the cultural background that gave rise to them, but from within, regarding them as decontextualized "monuments." Ruled out by this method of intrinsic, "pure" description are such familiar categories of historical analysis as the book and the *oeuvre*. The notion of the *oeuvre*, for instance, seems on first inspection to be simple and straightforward, a collection of texts designated by the author's name. Yet that author's name may be used to designate texts published under his own name, a text published under a pseudonym, an unfinished draft found after his death, letters, transcripts of interviews, reported conversations, even laundry lists. The humanistic historian imagines that the words of an author are united by an expressive function—his thought, experience, imagination, or the like. Such a unity is not given, however; it is the result of an interpretive operation that decides a priori which works to include and exclude, and brings together works with different expressive functions. Ruled out by this historical method is not only any reference to the subject as the source of historical material, but also any reference to the object as well, to what we would call the truth of the historical record. Foucault regards the monuments of history in the way the semiotician regards the signs of a language, as purely conventional.

Yet even though Foucault, like Derrida, extends the concepts of structuralism to renounce romantic idealism and scientific empiricism, his method of archeological reading is virtually the reverse of Derrida's method of deconstructive reading. For Der-

rida the interpretation of the text is endless because the text is woven from other signifiers, which are themselves intertextual. The meaning of the text is established by context, yet the possible contexts in which the text may be viewed are unlimited. At the same time Derrida recognizes that "the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely" (*Of Grammatology* 158), a statement that might be regarded as the basic premise of archeological history. For Foucault we are always already within an historical context that determines the way texts are written and read. The notion of intertextuality, instead of opening up a text, showing its indefiniteness, works for him in the opposite way, to limit the free play of the signifiers. Deconstructive protests against logocentrism by breaking the interpretive constraints that its hierarchies create.<sup>3</sup> Archeology protests against these constraints by demonstrating their historical ubiquity.

More specifically, for Foucault history is like a collection of languages, each of which determined for those who spoke the language what might be said or even noticed or thought.<sup>4</sup> The signs of the language are the discursive events of history, the "statements" that have been made, and the historian's task is to describe "the relations among statement" (31), the syntactic rules that regulated their permissible sequence. "How is it," Foucault's methodology asks, "that one particular statement appeared rather than another?" (27). Such an analysis requires that the historian choose a discursive field "in which the relations [among statements] are likely to be numerous, dense, and relatively easy to describe" (29) in order to be sure that the historical system was relatively autonomous. In works before *The Archeology of Knowledge* Foucault had studied in this structuralist manner the development of such densely-regulated discursive practices as psychiatry (*Madness and Civilization*) and clinical medicine (*The Birth of the Clinic*). The "statements" he has particularly in mind are those made in such scientific, professional contexts since they have dominated the everyday experience of modern man, relegating some people to the category of outcasts — the mad, the sick, the criminal, for instance — and elevating others — the practitioners of the disciplines — to figures of authority. Out of these disciplines has grown a seemingly endless array of legal restraints, moral teachings, therapeutic practices and institutions of confinement and education that in Foucault's dark vision makes the lives of both insiders and outsiders a nightmare of regimentation.

Foucault gives the name "discursive formations" to these repressive modern discourses, and identifies four constituent elements in the statements of each: their objects (such as madness in psychiatry), their style, their concepts (such as "subject" and "object" in grammar), and their rhetorical strategies. Since each discourse changes in time, its unity is provided by systematic differences in these elements. The unity of a group of statements about madness, for instance, does not rest on the existence of an unchanging object since madness has denoted different mental illnesses in different times and among different authorities in any given time. Rather the unity rests on "the interplay of rules that define different objects, their non-identity through time, the breaks produced in them, the internal discontinuities that suspend their permanence" (32-33). The rules of the discursive formation constitute their objects rather than the other way around. Similarly, one cannot find the unity of a discipline in recurring themes because there will always be disagreements among the practitioners of a discipline. Beneath those disagree-

ments, however, will be agreed-upon strategies that permit the articulation of conflicting themes.

Foucault's concept of a discursive formation has entered into vogue in American literary criticism and composition theory primarily through the considerable polemical verve with which Stanley Fish has advanced his similar concept of an "interpretive community" in his collection of essays *Is There a Text in This Class?* Fish's theory reiterates the familiar semiotic insistence that reading is never a purely disinterested or neutral act, but always a function of the contexts in which the reader places the text. Fish terms these contexts "interpretive strategies" and asserts in the manner of Foucault that they are never the creation of individual readers but of the interpretive community to which the reader belongs. In this way, Fish points out, he is able to collapse the distinction between the knowing subject and the known object: interpretive strategies constitute both object and subject, texts and readers. There is no reference point outside these interpretive strategies from which one can judge the accuracy or superiority of one interpretation of a text to another. In theory any group of people who share interpretive strategies for decoding texts constitutes an interpretive community, but Fish is primarily concerned with the interpretive communities in literary criticism and with describing the mass of unwritten and often unconsciously assimilated rules that govern these critical systems, rules that determine what constitutes an acceptable critical project, methodology, interpretive statement, and the like. Such rules identify a unity in diversity and the constraints that lie behind what may appear to be an unfettered movement of discourse.

The essay "What Makes an Interpretation Possible?" offers telling examples of these rules. In professional literary circles, Fish maintains, one cannot simply say anything about a text; one must claim, first of all, to be establishing its "real point." But this "real point" only makes sense in relation to what had previously been thought to be the text's "real point." The critic must work within the space marked out by his predecessors; new readings have to exist in a differential relation to previous readings. Moreover, there are rules that determine what kinds of differences one can establish with previous readings. One cannot, for example, fault previous readings of a poem for failing to demonstrate the presence of split infinitives and dangling modifiers because handbook grammaticality is not one of the standards by which the literary community at present appraises poems. The critic will, however, ensure his or her interpretation a favorable hearing if he or she claims not only to be offering a new, more valid interpretation, but one that shows the text to possess qualities thought to be literary — such as unity in complexity or metaphoric richness.

Even though the notion of the interpretive community is a weapon with which Fish can attack critical orthodoxy, particularly the continuing reign of the New Criticism, it is at the same time a double-edged sword that cuts in favor of orthodoxy, as the subtitle of Fish's book — "the Authority of Interpretive Communities" — indicates. Like Foucault, Fish reduces the "statements" of a professional discipline to the level of rhetorical gestures, but maintains at the same time that the practitioners within the discipline have no choice but to comply with the rules if they wish to be taken seriously. Literary criticism may be a game, Fish concedes, but it is the only game in town. It is not surprising then that the movement to introduce the ideas of Foucault and Fish into composition theory has led to the advocacy of teaching strategies that seem curiously subversive and conservative at the same time. Typically the argument is that freshman

English should spell out for students the norms of the academic discourse community. Thomas Newkirk, for instance, demonstrates that students and teachers do not evaluate essays by the same set of standards and concludes that a teacher should not ask students to write to their peers as their audience and then pretend that he or she can judge how these peers will respond. Instead, Newkirk maintains, students should write to their teacher as a representative of the academic world and be taught explicitly the conventions of that "evaluative community." And David Bartholomae argues that basic writers especially would benefit from the confidence that comes from writing within the boundaries of a privileged discourse. "What our beginning students need to learn," he claims, "is to extend themselves into the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals, gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions, and necessary connections that determine the 'what might be said' and constitute knowledge within the various branches of our academic community" (11).<sup>5</sup>

Part of the attraction of this way of thinking is its apparent ability to expose many of the approaches we have taken in freshman English in the last few decades as naive and misguided. The recent review essays of Patricia Bizzell have deployed this theoretical power with unusual effectiveness. Fifteen years ago, she observes, composition teachers judged the writing of their students by the standards of the academic discourse community while assuming that such standards were virtually self-evident and did not need to be taught. Weak students were simply unintelligent, not ill-informed. When in the last decade more and more students entered college unfamiliar with these standards by virtue of their social background, the writing program began to expand so as to permit more time for their initiation. This proliferation of courses occurred, however, without any recognition of the need to explain academic discourse. Indeed, the "authentic voice" pedagogy of the 1960's rejected the conventions of the academic community. This approach proved unsatisfactory, in Bizzell's view, because it was "too individualistic" ("College Composition" 193) and failed to recognize that it depended on having students who were already educated in these academic conventions. The current emphasis on writing as a cognitive process, however, also neglects the regulative function of discursive conventions and retains the individualistic bias of the "authentic voice" school. It regards writing as the activation of innate, universal psychological processes and leads to the view, expressed by Andrea Lunsford, that basic writers are ego-centered and deficient in reasoning skills. A more accurate view, according to Bizzell, is that basic writers lack "knowledge both of the ways experience is constituted in the academic discourse community and of the fact that all discourses constitute and interpret experience" ("Cognition, Convention, and Certainty" 230). This deficiency is best remedied, she argues, by a writing-across-the-curriculum pedagogy using a textbook such as *Writing in the Arts and Sciences* by Elaine P. Maimon et al.

In his influential 1920 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot, evidently drawing upon Saussure's concept of a linguistic system, asserts that the whole of Western literature from Homer to the present constitutes a simultaneous order, so that the introduction of a new work modifies the existing works, making us see them in a new way. A poet with the proper historical sense does not try to convey his unique personal emotions, but sacrifices himself to literary tradition, writing with the literature of the past in his bones. By virtue of their common semiotic heritage, Derrida and Foucault also regard the text as

inherently intertextual and impersonal. A new text exists in a diacritical relation to older texts. Authors do not write texts so much as other texts write texts. Derrida and Foucault differ, however, in the conclusions they draw from this common premise. For Derrida the network of texts to which any given text belongs is boundless, a fact which guarantees that the text will be incoherent and endlessly referential. For Foucault texts as a historical fact belong to circumscribed historical orders that limit their range of reference.

As a consequence there is no single post-structuralist model for freshman English. If we follow Derrida our writing course will emphasize discovery and invention in intertextual reading/writing; if we follow Foucault (and Fish), it will emphasize, as Bartholomae points out, imitation and parody (11). One model encourages creative freedom; the other adherence to the conventions of academic and professional disciplines. In deconstruction pedagogy the teacher is on an equal footing with the students as a fellow inquirer; in archeology the teacher is at the center of the classroom as the authority on the rules of a discursive formation or interpretive community. From the point of view of each approach the other is naive. To a Derridean, a course that requires students to practice the arbitrary interpretive strategies of an academic discipline acquiesces in the tyranny of logocentrism. To a Foucauldian, deconstruction offers only an illusion of freedom. He or she would question, for instance, whether the student who is assigned to write deconstructive interpretations of texts is really being taught critical reading—as Derrida's followers claim—or conformity to one method of reading. Is not the ability to recognize a problem in a text, for instance, a function of prior knowledge rather than simply the carefulness of the reading? It seems likely to me that students would identify problems that the teacher, by the light of his or her interpretive strategies, would consider insignificant or even non-problematic. Or, to take another example, might not students innocent of the conventions by which literary scholars interpret poems base their suppositions about Richard Cory's final thoughts on an interpretation of the reasons for his suicide that their teacher would believe reductive or far-fetched?

In the debates that currently rage in literary circles, Derrida and Foucault both have distinguished and persuasive advocates.<sup>6</sup> A similar tussle is now going on over the future of composition theory. Yet rather than subscribe fully to the views of either Derrida or Foucault, most teachers of writing would prefer to adopt a more measured response, I believe. Not many of us are likely to be convinced by their attempt to make everything disappear into a haze of language—an attempt that leads Foucault to argue, for instance, that changes in medical theory during the nineteenth century represent "nothing more than a syntactical reorganization of disease" (*The Birth of the Clinic* 195). There is no doubt that the persuasiveness of new statements in a professional field depends upon their relation to previous statements, but to assert that they owe their persuasiveness entirely to this relation conflates the distinctions between necessary and sufficient conditions (Dreyfuss and Rabinow 58). It is not surprising then that Patricia Bizzell adopts what might appear to be contradictory attitudes toward the conventions of academic discourse. On the one hand, she argues that students from working class backgrounds need "composition instruction that exposes and demystifies the institutional structure of knowledge" ("College Composition" 196), showing as conventional the patterns of language usage that prevail in the academic world and society as well. On the other hand, she says that she does not agree with those who regard academic work as worthless because she believes "that the

abstracting, formalizing power of academic work enables us to understand our world in ways not made available by common sense or folk wisdom" ("College Composition" 206). To the Foucauldian purist academic instruction is worthless in the sense that it can claim no objective validity. Bizzell, however, wishes to see it as both conventional and in some ways valid.

Moreover, writing teachers are not likely either to abandon their commitment to personal writing as a genre of freshman English, despite the clamor in structuralism and post-structuralism against the notion of the author and the transcendental subject. The polemical assertion that "selves are constituted by the ways of thinking and seeing that inhere in social organizations" (Fish 336) asks us to forget that our motive for reading is often to share the private life of another person, the self beneath the masks. One would like to hear more recognition in composition theory today that, in Harold Bloom's words, "the human writes, the human thinks" (60). And just as we will resist the effort to dislodge the author as the authority who controls the shape of his or her text, so are we certain to resist the related assertion in Derrida that texts lack a communicative function.<sup>7</sup> It is surely true that texts take on the color of their contexts and that as an intellectual exercise we can read them in as many ways as we can find contexts. On the other hand, with many texts we feel reasonably comfortable that we understand the context out of which the text emerged and thus reasonably comfortable that we have grasped its meaning. Good reading depends upon a vigilant alertness to the possibility of other ways of reading a text, but we don't always read for the purpose of misreading a text or demonstrating its incoherence. We read out of our human interest in finding out what someone else has to say.

Nevertheless Derrida and Foucault deserve from teachers of writing a sympathetic engagement with their texts. One need not assent to Derrida's belief that the era of logocentrism has passed to profit from his eloquent insistence on the hollowness of all attempts to assert a final closure over texts. We want our writing courses to encourage the critical, open-minded outlook that Derrida inspires. And we want our students to regard their writing not as a hopeless effort to capture a transcendental signified, but as a dialogue with other writers who also belong to the real, not the ideal, world.<sup>8</sup> We also want them to explore, as part of this dialogue, the thoughts they themselves have put down on paper. And even though we may not be persuaded by Foucault's melodramatic view of professional discourse as an exercise in thought control and brainwashing, we will want to pass on to our students the recognition that such discourse does abide by complex and often unwritten rules that they, if they wish to make their way in the world, need to be aware of and even abide by. Because ours is a practical discipline, we need not be unduly concerned about theoretical orthodoxy. We may, in eclectic fashion, take from the intellectual systems of our day—and there are many others of interest besides post-structuralism—the ideas that prove valuable in stimulating our students to write better and set aside those that do not contribute to our mission.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Hawkes and Leitch provide general orientations to structuralism and post-structuralism, respectively; see also the anthologies of Innis and Harari.

<sup>2</sup>Sharon Crowley takes a somewhat different approach in "Of Gorgias and Grammatology," arguing that freshman English should no longer uphold the logocentric ideal of transparent, utilitarian prose but instead help students to "develop a sense of

play through language" (284). Crowley recommends for this purpose reading works that do use language playfully, occasionally writing opaque prose, experiments with rhetorical devices such as antithesis and parallelism, and exercises in sentence-combining and Christensen's sentence-building technique.

<sup>3</sup>I describe here and throughout the essay the earlier, more classic form of deconstruction. Of late Derrida has begun to sound more like Foucault, emphasizing the institutional restraints that do in fact govern the reading and writing of texts. See, for instance, his essay on Hegel in *Demarcating the Disciplines*, an issue of *Glyph* that explores this new direction in Derrida's thought.

<sup>4</sup>On the complex relationship between structuralism and Foucault's archeology, see the excellent study of Dreyfuss and Rabinow 44-78.

<sup>5</sup>In this conservative/liberal vein, see also Edward M. White's argument that Fish's concept of the interpretive community justifies holistic writing assessment; Elizabeth P. Rankin's call for the teaching of the stylistic preferences of "rhetorical communities"; and Alan C. Purves' contention that international students belong to the rhetorical communities of their homeland and need to be initiated into the conventions of the American academic discourse community. For a description of an advanced composition course that teaches students to recognize the repressiveness of academic "knowledge," see Carol Snyder.

<sup>6</sup>Derrida's most prominent advocates, such as Johnson, Miller, and Jonathan Culler, tend to ignore Foucault; Foucault's advocates, such as Edward W. Said (see especially 178-225) and Frank Lentricchia (especially 156-210) tend to contrast Derrida unfavorably with Foucault, preferring the latter for his elaborate documentation of the connection between knowledge and power in modern European culture.

<sup>7</sup>W. Ross Winterowd has questioned the utility of deconstruction in teaching composition because it undercuts a view of writing as expression or communication. In reply Sharon Crowley faults Winterowd for denying students authority over their texts by wishing to say to them, "I know what you are trying to say in this paper, and I can help you say it better" ("On Poststructuralism and Composition"). Yet Crowley's position that language itself writes a text may deprive the student of authority even more.

<sup>8</sup>See Sharon Crowley's contrast between current-traditional and deconstructive views of the text in "Writing and Writing" 93.

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**"YOU MAY HAVE WON THE  
CHEVROLET CAMARO":  
"JUNK MAIL" AS A RESOURCE FOR  
THE TEACHING OF WRITING**

Bob J. Frye  
Texas Christian University

"Dear Bob J. Frye: This will be our final attempt to notify you that you may have won the Chevrolet Camaro." Sound familiar? Or how about this one: "Dear Gulf Customer: As an American, I recognize your love of country, and why you are proud to be an American. That's why I want you to know about this beautiful item of interest to collectors of Americana — The American Eagle Commemorative Folding Pocket Knife."

Such unsolicited letters, often termed "junk mail," stream into our mailboxes. Most of us routinely toss them. But I want to suggest that these letters may provide us with a useful resource for studying writing with our students. The letters' easy accessibility, their linking us with the "real world" outside the classroom, and, most importantly, the rhetorical choices they illustrate may enable us to use a convention already familiar to our students — letter writing — as a means for them to examine, with us, the process of writing. We know from James J. Murphy and others that instruction in rhetoric by means of letter writing dates from the early Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, that letter writing has immediate practical value for our students is evident not only by the NCTE's publishing jointly with the U.S. Postal Service the revised pamphlet *All About Letters* (1982) but also by Edward P. J. Corbett's observation in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*: "Today we cannot afford to neglect formal training in this form of discourse. Letters — friendly letters, business letters, promotional letters, letters to the editor — are the major form of written discourse that many of us will be called upon to produce after we leave school" (2nd ed., 606).