

## THE ME AND THE NOT ME OF ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

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I was once a promising grad student. After all, if it was enough to drive Ann Beattie to write best sellers, it could do the same for me. I longed to fling my entire being (or is that my entire nothingness?) into the baptismal waters of existential anguish. I was absolutely positive Jesus was a rhetorician, and I couldn't wait to be saved.

But a funny thing happened on the road to Damascus. I, like Saul, saw the light; and, in seeing the light, I also saw the darkness from which I had come. But how could there be both? Suddenly, down the road came a vendor yelling, "Methods, get your methods here!"

"Wow, just what I needed. Can you help me understand darkness and light?"

"Boy, do I have a method for you. First, you define your terms, then you break those terms into parts and define the parts. Then you break those parts into parts and define those parts. It's called Ramism. We're running a special on it today—buy the dialectics and you get the rhetoric free."

"But will this bring me truth?"

"Lady, it'll bring you anything you want it to bring you, believe me. It's Ramism. There's no question it can't answer."

Wow! I could not believe it. For the amazingly low price of \$29.95 I got the dialectics along with the free rhetoric, complete with a language slicer dicer, a topic grater, and a five record set of "Disco Disputatio: Songs to Dance and Argue By." (Did this mean Jesus did disco? I thought he only did soul.) Thrilled out of my mind (soon to be my only state of existence), I rushed home and cranked up the music, humming along with "Don't Be Cruel to a Logic That's True," while I ran darkness and light through my language slicer dicer. But the more I chopped, the more there was to chop. The more I defined, the more there was to define. I couldn't tell whether I was using Ramism or it was using me.

Suddenly, the slicer dicer turned on me as if it had a mind of its own, an obvious difference from Ramus. Soon it was chopping me, separating mind from matter, self from other, *Me* from *Not Me*. So this is what true existential anguish was. Then, to my horror, the *Not Me* began speaking . . .

In the French version of the *Dialectique* (1576), Ramus described three axioms essential to logical division and to our concepts of truth. *Lex veritatis* enabled Ramus to isolate propositions that were only true at times and thus fell more into the realm of opinion than of necessary and demonstrable truths; *lex justitiae* established principles of classification by distinguishing amongst sets and structurally related subsets; and *lex sapientiae*, as a complement to *lex justitiae*, enabled sets (or categories of thought) to be ranked in an epistemological hierarchy so that each set would be placed nearest to its most structurally appropriate category, rather than in the most remote.

In setting out his three axioms of definition, Ramus articulated, too, standards for establishing the truth (or demonstrability) of propositions. In this fashion, he sought propositions that were true at all times, propositions that were true at certain times, propositions that

could readily, by logical definition, be separated from other propositions, and a method for putting all propositions about a certain subject together in such a way that the order of the propositions indicates a hierarchy of truthful statements from most approximate (or true) to least approximate (or false). He also ensured that the "logic" of what would come to be accepted as rational thought would be a principle of separation rather than of synthesis and that the hierarchy would become the most accepted modality for the formulation of rational thought.

Obviously, the *Not Me* had gone berserk. I had embraced Ramus and had found the conflicts existing between my creative and analytical selves; my true, personal ethos and my trained, academic ethos; between Voice and Non-Voice, Being and Non-Being. My paradigms for discourse were fractured between my feminist impulses to view language in a non-linear, non-divisional fashion that rejected Aristotelian dualism and all of Ramus' neat little categories and sub-categories set up ever so carefully to give the illusion that all of existence could be understood via a hierarchical system, and my realization that if I were to survive in academe, to "speak the language" of the Academy, I had to embrace Ramus and Aristotelian dualism Father, Son, and Holy *lex veritatis*.

"No, no, no!" I insisted. I had to find a way to bring the *Me* and the *Not Me* together again, to heal myself and make myself whole. Arlo Guthrie was singing "You Can Get Anything You Want at Ramus' Restaurant" when I realized the only solution: Talk with Dr. Sequoia Noyes, my academic advisor, and the department's leading specialist on dualistic thinking. Dr. Noyes had once herself been an ardent feminist, a rejector of patriarchal thought in all its forms. Surely, she would know what to do.

I found Dr. Noyes, who was known to her pro-Ramist colleagues as Dr. Noise or Dr. No/Yes, in her office, a true academic cubicle of institutional white walls covered with posters and prints that asserted the uniqueness of the individual and the fundamental unity of all thought.

"I am losing *Me* in a vortex of Ramist definitions and categories, Dr. Noyes, watching the *Not Me* take on a whole new Frankenstein-like identity. I wanted to be an academician, but I didn't want *this* to happen to me. What do I do?"

"People forget wild horses can't tame themselves," Dr. Noyes began. "They see a horse on the prairie, mane flying, nose flared, muscles rippled where the legs pound and stomp the ground, kicking dust in the face of anyone who tries to follow. How beautiful. How wonderful to own. But they know they cannot tame it. So they do the next best thing. They try to get the horse to tame itself."

I had forgotten that Dr. Noyes tended to speak in parables, a natural consequence, I assumed, of being a devotee of Ramus.

*Freshman English News* is published three times a year at Texas Christian University. Subscription price for one year (three issues) is \$5.00. Reduced rates for graduate student group orders are available. Manuscripts conforming to the 1984 MLA Style Sheet should be sent, in duplicate, to the editor; subscriptions should be sent to the managing editor. (ISSN 0739-4713)

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Like Ramus, she never said anything in ten words that she could say in fifty.

"I'm not following your drift here, Dr. Noyes. Could you explain?"

"When one is an undergraduate, teachers are thrilled with the unusual. Bored out of their minds, having taught American Fiction from 1910 longer than their students have been alive, they suddenly come to life when a student turns in a paper on *The Color Purple* written in dialect. They write long notes in the margins and want to talk to you after class. They call you a breath of fresh air and say you should consider graduate school.

You feel as if you could burst with ideas. You aspire to be the consummate Rhetorician and bring feuding camps back together again. You want to be on the cutting edge. You dream of being famous.

Then you turn in your first paper. Suddenly, those people who wanted you to be unusual want you to conform. But they still want to be perceived as open-minded since they teach one of the 'liberal' arts, so they tell you to attempt a more 'academic voice' next time. But the next time, you're that much farther across the prairie, that much more out of touch with what they want, expect, have to have in order to squeeze you into their value system that you never asked to fit into in the first place. You thought you were going to graduate school to perfect being wild and free with your ideas. You never expected to be bridled. None of us ever did."

I thought I noticed a trace of nostalgia in Dr. Noyes' eyes, perhaps a bit of lost idealism or a long-stilled memory of running free on the prairie herself.

"I don't like the dichotomies, the either/or choices I'm presented with, Dr. Noyes. I'd rather be an academic Barthelme, a true postmodernist, without a need for traditional forms, blending and merging a whole range of eclectic forms."

"Barthelme doesn't write for academe. If you aspire to be Barthelme, seek a creative writing program."

"But I'm not interested only in fiction, but the intersections where fiction and non-fiction meet; where rhetoric and literature blur; where composition and creativity become one. Just like Barthelme thinks of life as a collage, so learning comes from the inside and the outside both. You, and the academic traditions you represent, are forcing students to choose, and only accepting the outside (your side) as the right choice."

"We're not alone in this. Corporate America makes you choose. Banks make you choose. Law school makes you choose. If anything, we're merely preparing students for that what they will encounter when they graduate."

Somewhere, something had gone terribly wrong. It was like getting on a boat supposedly bound for Hawaii and ending up in Iceland. Hey, they both have volcanoes; what difference does it make? Write the papers the way they want you to write the papers and be yourself when you get out of graduate school. But what if I'm not the same by the time I graduate. What if I look in the mirror three years from now and can't remember who I was or how to become that person again. What if I'm like the chalk written on the backs of first graders in "Trout Fishing In America Terrorists," that slowly fades, like the imagination itself, out of existence?

"Remember the wild horses, Miss Beckelman, and tame yourself. Your future, your career, are in your hands."

"But I want to be a wild horse."

"No, you want to be an academician."

"I do?"

"That's why you're faced with this dilemma."

"I thought I was seeking the truth about darkness and light."  
"Haven't you found it?"

## OCCASION AND NEED IN WRITING: An Annotated Essay

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I wrote the little essay that follows, "Cheerio," as part of an assignment in my freshman composition class. No credit is owed for that, and I feel no special guilt. We had been talking about whether or not some subjects are inherently more interesting than others. I got carried away in the course of the discussion and claimed that there was no such thing as a dull subject. One thing led to another. The students were pretty sure that there are dull subjects, began to list some, and before the class period was over, I had drawn the assignment to describe a single Cheerio. A single Cheerio had turned out to be their favorite dull subject. "Cheerio" is the result. I reproduce it here, with the annotations that follow, because it turned out later to be moderately useful for teaching purposes, because I think I learned in writing it what I had not quite learned from composition textbooks or elsewhere — a little about how writing both creates and rises from occasion and need, a little about how occasion and need come together. I have numbered the paragraphs for later reference.

### CHEERIO

1. For a long time, until she came to suspect that my character was not susceptible of correction, my mother tried to get me to eat Raisin Bran for breakfast. I was young then, and she thought they were healthy, as such things go. But I couldn't face the dead bugs floating among the bran flakes in the milk — earlier my big brother had told me that the dark things in raisin bread were dead bugs, and I reasoned that the dark things in the cereal must be dead bugs, too. I chose Post Toasties instead, imitating my brother, but after a while I realized that they were given to instant sogginess. Then for a long time I ate Wheaties, the Breakfast of Champions. I cannot tell whether or not I actually liked Wheaties, but the box had nifty baseball stories and pictures. But by and by, in the fullness of time, I lost all those pictures and discovered Cheerios.

2. But that was not until later, when I discovered that I had children of my own. In the meantime, I had given up cereal for coffee and toast, usually cinnamon toast. But then, with my children, I found Cheerios. It wasn't easy: we spent a lot of time in the cereal aisle of the grocery store, looking at all the boxes, and we tried first one and then another. But we stayed with Cheerios a long time, though there was a brief flirtation with Captain Crunch. I can't remember whether or not there was anything on the Cheerios box that they saved, and I can't remember what the box itself looked like when they were young. I wish I could. I do remember that one of my daughters made a necklace of Cheerios, and my son played checkers with them, though it was a little hard to distinguish one side from the other. As they grew older, they mostly gave up Cereal, and I went back to having coffee and toast, or coffee and a bagel, or coffee and a granola bar, or coffee and coffee.

3. The current Cheerios box is mostly yellow. The one on my desk is ten and three-quarters inches high, seven and a half inches across, and two and three-eighths inches deep. On what I