

## JACKLEG CARPENTRY AND THE FALL FROM FREEDOM TO AUTHORITY IN WRITING

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The "bricoleur" is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with "whatever is at hand" . . . Further, the "bricoleur" also, and indeed principally, derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he "speaks" not only *with* things . . . but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities. The "bricoleur" may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it.

— Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*

The "bricoleur" has no precise equivalent in English. He is a man who undertakes odd jobs and is a Jack of all trades . . .

— G. C. Spivak, Introduction, *Of Grammatology*

### (1)

The other day, a colleague told us a little about an essay he had just finished. Knowing him, we knew it would be well written; he would have worked it meticulously, and he was willing, therefore, to be a little proud of it, to consider it well-crafted. Neither of us has read it yet, but we expect it is.

We all admire and cherish well-crafted things. We remember various well-made things — a table a father made and John Graves' book, *Goodbye to a River*, a daughter's music and another daughter's Christmas presents, a certain cheesecake and a no-hit game a son pitched when he was fifteen, a particular fish dish and two paragraphs we wrote, obviously not consecutive, being separated by seven years and scores of pages. We look for the well-crafted. We want, and perhaps think we need, things to be well made, to stay fixed, to be eternal; we want, perhaps need, a post to hitch ourselves to so that we won't get loose. But we're always loose. For that reason, if for no others (and there are others), we want to celebrate not craft (surely not *perfection* in craft), but the bricoleur's trade, known in West Texas as jackleg carpentry. Since that is our customary mode in all such arts, crafts, sciences, and technologies as we undertake, praising jackleg carpentry amounts to defending ourselves, which is perhaps unseemly. We'll not be deterred, however; all writing, in one way or another, is a defense of oneself, an accounting for oneself.

Jackleg carpentry (and one can practice anything, certainly writing, in the jackleg way) may be defined as that mode in which, upon completion of a job, the carpenter backs off, surveys the work, and says, "Well, there it is, by God, — it ain't much, but it'll hold us until we can think of something better." We have often deplored jackleggerly, including our own, done

our share of fussing about things that don't stay fixed, have sometimes longed for the principle that endures, the sure pattern or model, the Law that makes things so they stay fixed. Now, however, we want to praise things made in the jackleg way, and to praise the way itself.

In olden times (was it 1914 or this morning?) we tended to think of texts as well-crafted final products. Whether we were reading a literary text or a scholarly/critical text, we tended to think them *definitive*: finished, bounded, and still — urn-like in the fullness and silence of their own self-sufficiency. The mode of scholarly writing prevailing through most of this century sought both to be and to seem definitive: scholarly papers and books typically presented the "review of scholarship" before proceeding with their own pronouncements. (And readers, including referees for journals and books — we have both been one of these, at times — usually looked for the definitive: more specifically, the definitive text *the readers themselves* imagined should be written.) But texts are never definitive unless we believe and pretend they are so: Milton continues to emerge to us, unfinished; Johnson in the *Rambler* papers is more often exploring than proclaiming; those "definitive," those "authoritative" scholarly works elude the writer as well as the reader, requiring to be done over by each author in each generation.

We do not have to look for, and may not need, the definitive. The definitive or authoritative text is a *declared* text, a complete and self-enclosed text, an *owned* text. We might instead learn to think of texts, including especially those we and our students write, not as definitive but as open-ended, not as owned but as growing (and grown from within). We're recommending a return to *bricolage*, the *jackleg* text: "Well, there it is, by God — it ain't much, but it'll hold us until we can think of something better." We seek, therefore, to deconstruct current notions of authority in writing; we seek in their place a transformational definition, one that turns authority into its apparent opposite, freedom. And we seek to replace "the book" — the fixed, authoritative, definitive text — with *bricolage*, the term Jacques Derrida takes from Claude Levi-Strauss to describe the always unstable, always unfinished, always contingent nature of writing as the active construction of self and world. Still, by a Sartrean-existentialist detour, we depart from Jacques(leg) Derrida (the master-bricoleur; and yet, can the "Jack" of any trade be at the same time its master?) on one crucial idea: it is not polysemy — the freedom-to-mean of the signifier — but the freedom-to-mean of the writing/reading consciousness that we wish to assert. Freedom, we believe, and not authority or even "use" in any traditional sense, is the ground of discourse.

How, then, does writing differ from other modes of technology? As Jean-Paul Sartre observes, "It may doubtless be said that all tools address themselves to our freedom since they are the instruments of a possible action":

I may use a hammer to nail up a case or to hit my neighbor over the head. Insofar as I consider it in itself, it is not an appeal to my freedom; it does not put me face to face with it; rather, it aims at using it by substituting a set succession of traditional procedures for the free invention of means. The book does not serve my freedom; it requires it. (1061-62)

By placing "the book" among humankind's tools, Sartre warns us against equating technology with functional material objects (objects like computers, say, or hammers: technology, as Martin Heidegger also suggests, is in its essence the material expression or realization of human thought — thought that reshapes the

physical world by creating new structures). Yet "the book" is preserved from enslavement to a particular use or end. The engineer's tools are restricted to a set procedure or application: to treat a hammer *as* a hammer is to deny the inventive possibilities of the object and user alike—what, after all, are hammers *for* if not to "fix" things, beating, banging, nailing them into place? Indeed a hammer ceases to be a hammer when used in any other way, just as a sword forever loses its identity when beaten into a ploughshare.

But what, we might ask, are *texts* for? What end or instrumentality do they serve? Sartre writes that "the book is not, like the tool, a means for any end whatever; the end to which it offers itself is the reader's freedom" (1062). In fact the text, as Sartre describes it, serves the freedom of author and reader alike. "The author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of readers, and he requires it in order to make his work exist. But he does not stop there:"

he also requires that they return this confidence which he has given them, that they recognize his creative freedom, and that they in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal. . . . the more we experience our freedom, the more we recognize that of the other; the more he demands of us, the more we demand of him. (1063)

This double appeal to freedom—the freedom to invent, to jackleg our world, to have a meaning of our own even as we recognize, affirm, *celebrate* the freedom-to-mean (the freedom-to-be) of the other—is an appeal we heartily espouse. We know, however, that it flies in the teeth of current attitudes toward writing (and writing instruction). And we wonder why this must be so: why is it that we teach authority instead of freedom?

Granted, we are always in the midst of a world already "engineered" or socially-constructed for us, always in the midst of some interpretive community, thinking the thoughts our particular technology enables; the world circumscribes us, shaping and to an extent limiting what we can think to write. It is *in* freedom, however, and certainly *through* freedom, that we write our texts. And it is only in a jacklegged sort of freedom, a freedom to think beyond the already-constructed, one that deconstructs the definitive and authoritative, one that invents freshly (and is never *finished* in its inventing) that the world and self can grow. But it seems that our writing is always giving up its freedom, seeking, like a "Witch's Hammer" or some other "authoritative" instrument, to compel belief, to accuse the heretic, to fix truth. We cling to the notion—though our students might disagree—that writing and reading are at least free *acts*; still, when a text gets written it often hardens into authority. (It's as if authority is something a text achieves after it is written, something that belongs—or rather is imputed—to the product rather than process of composition.) When the words are finished, the writer's freedom ends; and *if* it is imputed to the text (a rare event, actually, in writing classes), authority then makes its grand entrance, pronouncing on the truth and goodness of the finished product. (Most students think they *never* achieve authority; many teachers tell them so, because many teachers think that *they themselves* are the authority, or, at least, the appointed representatives of authority; and most students believe them.) In the classroom, then, authority is always either given or withheld from without. It can come, moreover, from sources beyond the personality of the teacher: from the tyranny of the most vocal student, for example, from the arrangement of desks in a room, from the general curriculum or the specific course plan, from the textbooks, from the reigning attitudes toward language. This is

not a notion that we're easy with—the idea that authority (in texts, classrooms, life) is always imputed to (or withheld from) *finished* texts, and that freedom, never the achievement (or even the aim) of texts, always slips away to be replaced by its antithesis. Why is this? How?

## (2)

How is it that we have allowed authority to become so thoroughly antithetical to freedom in our writing classes? The word itself preserves, among its many senses, the very freedom that it seems so often to deny and devour—and we need at times to remind ourselves of this. The Latin *auctoritas* derives ultimately from the verb *augere*, to make or cause to grow, to originate.<sup>1</sup> Far from a restraining, defining, or limiting force, *auctoritas* thus means in its primary sense *production, invention, cause*: it signifies the originating power of all human activity, particularly verbal activity—whence the term also signifies *liberty, ability, power*. The *auctor* is one who "brings about the existence of any object, or promotes the increase or prosperity of it, whether he first originates it, or by his efforts gives greater permanence or continuance to it" (Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*); the author is the *founder*, then, the *producer*, the *originator*, the *augmentor*, and her "authority," her creative power, becomes freedom itself—the freedom (and freedom is power) to speak and write. *Auctoritas* in its first and purest sense is thus *libertas* combined with *facultas*. Freedom in discourse becomes the *ground of authority*, and authority itself becomes—ideally, at least—the *ground of trust* or belief between speaker and audience: for *ethos* becomes as it were the "authority"—the speaking into being—of the author, the author authoring herself.

In its primary sense, then, *auctoritas* is no less than human freedom and facility. To express this freedom is to *create*—for the speaker or writer specifically, to create discourse. But authority has fallen, we see, from its root sense into self-denial and contradiction. Authority becomes restrictive and destructive of freedom when it becomes fixed as *law*; *originating* authority becomes *normative*, determining now not what *can* but what *should* be written or spoken. Like the political authority of the classical (or contemporary) *senatus*, the authority of Standard Edited English assumes, on behalf of an educated or political elite, the power to judge all present and future discourse by the discourse of its own "authorized" past. This legalistic sense then merges with the sense of *auctor* as model, exemplar, or pattern. What was primarily an *originating* authority becomes now not only *normative* but *prescriptive*, emphasizing *imitation* over creation in discourse. The authority becomes the model, one that fixes (for eternity?) the laws to which discourse must conform, establishing the standards by which we are all, always, to be judged. The *auctor-as-judge* yields next to the *auctor-as-merchant*—as one who possesses (and can thus negotiate, trade, and sell) the words he speaks or writes. Plagiarism and the *meum* and *tuum* of scholarship derive equally from this sense of authority-as-ownership. The final sense of authority is the most problematic (and pervasive) of all: *auctoritas* as the affirmation of truth or factuality in discourse. We are taught to make our present and future discourse *rely* on authority—the "authorized" discourse of a canonical past. In so doing we once again externalize authority: the ability to speak truth into being and to originate thought lies *outside* of us, contained in the alien text (or person, or institution) to which we appeal for ideas, arguments, evidence, "standards." (Our truth is not our own, made by us personally, but found in another's words; we are lessened by our inability to speak something first or best—hence the tyranny of authority.) We are rarely told, how-

ever, that *auctoritas* is a poor guarantor of truth: for the primacy of any one authority, as history and experience tell us, is mere myth; and when the "authorized" version changes (authorities vie, after all, for supremacy) correctness, standards, truth, reality itself change with it. *Auctoritas* is no guarantor of stability, either. While we are taught to use the concept of authority as a weapon against change, experience once more teaches us that *change alone* is guaranteed, for society as well as the individual—and change is thus equally guaranteed in our language and discourse. Truth is always jacklegged, though it seems (and we often wish it to be) static and permanent.

We admit that all speaking and writing entails some sense of authority, if only because all discourse is a plea for trust (if not a claim for truth), and all discourse is an expression of *ethos*. We affirm this ethical sense of authority and find it good. But what other senses of the word shall we affirm in our own discourse and in our own teaching of writing? Authority that is normative restricts discourse by defining—freezing—standards. Normative authority attempts, in short, to find the "definitive" text. Authority that is prescriptive again fixes—freezes—discourse in its conformity with sacred, revered models. (Once more, the search for the "definitive" text.) Authority can make discourse into a piece of property, an object of reverence, a subject of analysis, an imitation, a product. But only the authority of *individual creation* remains faithful to the root meaning of the term: *auctoritas* is the power and principle of origination and growth—*augere* means to grow. "To write" also means to grow, and *augere, auctoritas*, should celebrate this *process* of growth: discourse grows through the writing, and the writer herself grows through the discourse. Truly authoritative discourse should always originate, always express the power to create, always be in process. When discourse ceases to be in process it ceases to originate itself, ceases to *augment* itself, ceases to be its own author. Perhaps only then it can be "owned." Perhaps only then it can be a model or law. But its loss when it shifts from freedom to fixture, from process to product, is the loss of living authorship and growth. Discourse freezes into product, an artifact or mere commodity; much worse occurs when another's discourse is imposed between a writer and her own writing, to become an alien authority—one that demands conformity and imitation, prizing these things over growth and origination. This, alas, is the situation in most writing classes.

There is, however, a hope. Over here is the *author*, who must be free in order to learn and to write. Over there is *authority*, the texts (teacher, institution) become fixed, definitive, normative. But in between is *authorship*—the process, the perpetual hunt for texts only to back off, improvise, try again, search again through freedom to speak a gain in a continuous and ever provisional making of self and world. Invention is always becoming structure and style, which are always becoming invention, always becoming the spoken in diverse rhetorical occasions, which are always becoming the need for further invention and structure and style. We are always provisional self-makers, provisional world-makers, provisional text-makers. When we read or when we teach, we and the texts that are read, we and the course that is taught are making reality and creating identity in ourselves and our students. In *authorship* we begin to learn how to hold our own cyclings and dartings dear though weak, to nurture and preserve them in order to change them, knowing that we invent in order to make structures in order to serve occasions in order to invent and to make structures and styles and to serve occasions . . . in order to be making ourselves. In authorship—which we should prize as a state of living/writing over static (yet ulti-

mately unstable) authority—we begin to learn how to cherish, to unfold the other, holding dear that other's need to make, to be free to speak, to be free to learn a new or deeper voice, to become a self always becoming a self.

As authorship (*augere*, augmentation) implies, it is process and growth, and not perfection or conformity to some standard, that makes discourse true and beautiful and personally useful and personally valuable. Goals like process and growth make writing instruction jacklegged, too. Necessarily so. It seems that discourse must always be jacklegged. It must, for its own health, never be "fixed," never perfect or complete, never, really, a product to be judged as complete or (worse) owned and sold. It must only (and always) be "good enough," capable of change, always in motion. Discourse, when we think it is perfected (and perfection means completion), is a dead thing to the writer, incapable of allowing growth in him. We must always, for this reason, jackleg our discourse, in the same way we jackleg so many other things in our lives. Perhaps only the jacklegged things can have the highest meaning and value. Other things we can own, even admire; only the jacklegged things can be continually present and loved and involved in our being. And the jacklegged discourse that is us (and our students) will always die before an alien authority. We may often have despaired of jackleg carpentry, yearning for the well-crafted, the finished, the definitive. We should have known better, or as well: there is no sadness in jackleg carpentry, only wonder.

(3)

Shall we celebrate authorship, then, or authority in our writing classes? And if we keep the notion of authority, what meanings shall we valorize, the creative or the normative? And who shall be the "authorities" in our writing classes? (Just ask yourself: who are the "authors"? Must it be so hard to say, "Our students"?)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The following section expands upon our previous discussion of *auctoritas*: Jim W. Corder and James S. Baumlin, "Lamentations for—and Hopes against—Authority in Education," *Educational Theory*, 38 (Winter, 1988), 23-24.

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## AUDIENCE AWARENESS: METHODS AND MADNESS

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Over the last ten years or so the problem of audience in written discourse has been among the central concerns of our field. We writing teachers now have a developing (while sometimes confusing and contradictory) body of audience theory and