Dichotomy, Consubstantiality, Technical Writing, Literary Theory: The Double Orthodox Curse

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Imagine this scene. A technical writer employed by a large computer manufacturer must update the documentation for a redesigned fluid-mechanics process control system. No new hardware has been developed, but the software, which each end user must reinstall and reconfigure, has changed considerably. The writer has one month in which to delete all the outdated material, write approximately seventy-five screens of new material, and ensure that the new documentation seems both uniform and univocal. The revised documentation, which will exist only on-line and will offer hypertext navigational features, will require about two-hundred screens. The statistical process control (SPC) oversight program will require an additional twenty screens.

Imagine a second scene. An associate professor of literature who specializes in reader-response criticism must publish a book in order to be promoted. The professor must take into account all that has already been written about reader response and must be careful to demonstrate how the new book corrects and expands prior books. Since this professor has tenure, there is no particular deadline, but writing the book is a daunting task: first because the professor must find a university press interested in publishing yet another theory book in the area of reader response, and second because the professor must write a book that will please at least two unknown and anonymous referees. Though the literature professor must use MLA documentation style and generate a text that other professors will recognize as "a book," no particular rules about length, style, or delivery system constrain the writing process.

For now, let these scenes form a split-screen backdrop as I try to articulate two different conceptions of writing that come to us from ancient Greece. My purpose in articulating these conceptions is to use them as a field in which to compare the above writing scenes. I want to know whether the two scenes are the same, merely similar, or absolutely different. More importantly, I want to know whether the two scenes imply similar, different, or mutually exclusive pedagogies. I recognize that the reader-response

school does not encompass all literary theory just as software documentation does not encompass all technical writing. I use reader response and software documentation merely as extreme examples. I want to work at the extremes to see what, if anything, they show about the middle, if any such place exists.

An Ancient Dichotomy

Writing, as Plato would have it, is at best an innocuous pastime; at worst, it is a dangerous distraction capable of generating the illusion of false wisdom and incapable of communicating true knowledge. "It shows great folly," Plato's Socrates says near the end of Phaedrus, "to suppose that one can transmit or acquire clear and certain knowledge of an art through the medium of writing, or that written words can do more than remind the reader of what he already knows on any given subject" (275c). According to Plato, when it comes to writing, one must believe "that nothing worth serious attention has ever been written in prose or verse" (279e). "Any serious student of serious realities," Plato says in the "Seventh Letter,"

> will shrink from making truth the helpless object of men's ill-will by committing it to writing.... When one sees a written composition, whether it be on law by a legislator or on any other subject, one can be sure, if the writer is a serious man, that his book does not represent his most serious thoughts; they remain stored up in the noblest region of his personality. (344b-c; see also 343b)

Aristotle does not deal quite so harshly with writing as does Plato, but he carefully places it two removes from its "content." "Spoken words," he says in the second paragraph of *De Interpretatione*, "are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words." While Aristotle admits that all people do not have the same writing or the same speech, "the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize," he argues, "are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images" (16a5-10). I take this last clause to imply that some reality exists outside mental experience and is the universal of which mental experience is the image. I take the whole passage to imply that mental experience, the "content" that language must carry, is the same for everyone and that it exists both prior to and outside of any sort of language, whether spoken or written. In *De Anima* Aristotle repeats this quadripartite division into reality-experience-expression-inscription (431a1-10).

One can with some certainty describe the epistemological and ontological assumptions that Plato and Aristotle make about writing. Both exclude it entirely from the process of knowing, thereby separating it from invention. After this first move, however, an apparent disagreement occurs. Aristotle seems willing to allow writing to serve authorial intent. Although he does not allow writing a role in the *episteme*, neither does he condemn it utterly. Plato, of course, goes much further by separating writing absolutely from the best of a person's thought and self.

These notions of writing have widespread support. Nearly everyone who bothers to consider the matter at all agrees that writing represents speech, which in turn represents thought. Provoked to go beyond this initial notion, a few would agree with Plato, but most would agree with Aristotle. Even such trendy theorists as Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida, when pressed to discuss the matter at all, seem to regard the teaching of writing as a classical, traditional undertaking (Olson, "Social" 6-9 and "Derrida" 4-7).

Outside university humanities departments, the Platonic and Aristotelian notions of writing predominate. Carolyn Miller has shown how the Aristotelian "windowpane" notion, expounded most forcefully in this century by A.J. Ayer, has dominated technical writing since it first appeared in the 1940s in the aerospace and electronics industries. Building on her essay, David Dobrin has explored the tradition of Cartesian rationalism that comes to us through Bacon, Locke, Burke, Spencer, and the early Wittgenstein.

There is, of course, an alternative notion of writing. But one must work a little harder to find its ancient roots. One can begin with Heraclitus, who seems to have considered all existence as a dance of opposites, with no entity able to exclude its opposite. "In writing," according to one of his few extant fragments, "the course taken, straight and crooked, is one and the same." Were one to set up a Heraclitean thought-writing duality, one would have a forever self-recreating, transmogrifying dance of opposition, resulting in a Janus-faced notion (Stokes 478). While one can argue, as many classical scholars do, that Heraclitus built his philosophy on a unified logos, the Heraclitean "unity" is a unity of opposition resembling Saussurean "difference" if not Derridean "différance." In the *Refutatio Heresiorum*, Hippolytus quotes Heraclitus as saying, "They do not understand how that which differs with itself is in agreement: harmony consists of opposing tension, like that of the bow and the lyre." Plutarch renders the most famous Heraclitean dictum: "It is not possible to step twice into the same river. (It is impossible to touch the same mortal substance twice, but through the rapidity of change.... The combination and separation are simultaneous)..." (McLean and Aspell 35).

When one claims to see Heraclitean notions of writing in the works of Protagoras and Gorgias, one must argue inferentially because history has left us so few texts. Even so, the few scraps that remain imply notions rather different from those of Plato and Aristotle. Protagoras taught that all arguments carry within themselves their opposites; Gorgias, using a rhetorical strategy sometimes labeled "apogogic," assumed a plurality of voices for any possible argument (Barrett 9-18; see also Guthrie, Kerferd, and Sprague). Protagoras has been roundly condemned for millennia for his radical humanism ("man is the measure of all things") and his agnosticism. Gorgias has been condemned with equal vigor for his relativism: "Nothing exists," he wrote, "and if anything did exist humans could not know it, and if they could know it, they would have no means to communicate what they knew" (Freeman 125-39; Romeyer-Dherbey 7-52).

Just as one can summarize Plato and Aristotle, one can also summarize Heraclitus, Protagoras, and Gorgias. From their perspective, there is no prior place where thinking and meaning can prepare themselves for transportation in writing. If, as Heraclitus would have it, one cannot step twice into the same stream, then one cannot describe that stream as anything other than a brief, now lost, historical moment that was in the process of change even during the moment described. If, as Gorgias would have it, nothing exists, then the quadripartite Aristotelian notion of reality-experience-expression-inscription is nothing more than anthropocentric ego glorification. If, as Protagoras would have it, humankind is the measure of all things and if humans have no way to know about the existence of the gods, then Plato's divine Forms fade into triviality, if not willful self-delusion. As a result of all this, writing no longer plays a tertiary role. Rather, the unfinished and unfinishable process of writing permeates every aspect of whatever would like to present itself as outside of and prior to writing.

For the sake of convenience, I will call the Platonic-Aristotelian notion of writing classical; the Heraclitean-Protagorean-Gorgian notion sophistic.

A Modern Dichotomy

In spite of powerful theoretical work by Bazerman (6-17, 318-32), who tries to show the "situated, purposeful, strategic, symbolic activity" that makes all technical writing "rhetorical"; in spite of studies by Michael Halloran, Greg Myers, and Jone Rymer that show the rhetorical processes of scientific writing; in spite of important pedagogical efforts by Paul Anderson to bring a kind of reader response to technical writing; in spite of the work by Dobrin and Miller mentioned above; in spite of Merrill Whitburn's entire career; the classical notion dominates both theory and praxis in the field of technical writing. One can attend an STC convention or local chapter meeting or read through the dozens of technical writing texts published each year without ever suspecting all this theory exists. For example, in explaining how to write what they call "functional documents" (a phrase that would make a theorist's imagination race), Flower, Hayes, and Swarts articulate the "'scenario principle,' which states that functional prose should be structured around a human agent performing actions in a particularized situation" (42). Readability in technical writing, according to Jack Selzer, "is simply the efficiency with which a text can be comprehended by a reader, as measured by reading time, amount recalled, questions answered, or some other quantifiable measure of a reader's ability to process a text" (73). In her Herculean effort to make "document design" into a legitimate professional specialization, Karen Schriver makes clear that technical "writers need to find ways to design text that anticipates a quick, probably passive reading." Her method is to begin with "empirical findings about users' needs" and then specify "ways to design text that meets those needs" (319-20).

The textbooks are even more forthright. "Technical writing," argue Kelley and Masse, "is writing about a subject in the pure sciences or the applied sciences in which the writer informs the reader through an objective presentation of facts" (6). "The primary . . . characteristic of technical and scientific writing," Britton contends, "lies in the effort of the author to convey one meaning and only one meaning in what he says" (11). "Because readers use a technical document," Lannon explains, "it must be based on facts, and it must have one single meaning. Poetry and fiction, then, would not be forms of technical writing because they are largely based on intuition, feelings, and imagination" (4). "Technical writing is meant to get a job done," says Markel. "Everything else is secondary" (5). "Our readers are busy people who are interested only in facts," Blicq urges. "Information they do not need irks them. For these people we must keep strictly to the point" (41). "Technical writing is ideally characterized by the maintenance of an attitude or impartiality and objectivity, by extreme care to convey information accurately and concisely, and by the absence of any attempt to arouse emotion" (Mills and Walter, 5). And so on.

Look what a difference one finds when one moves to the sophistical notion of writing. Louise Phelps describes writing in that world as "marked by themes of loss, illusion, instability, marginality, decentering, and finitude" (5). Foucault and Derrida (however bitter their own disputes may have been and however much each would resent being called a sophist) articulate and exemplify the notion of writing I am describing. At the end of the Introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, after having foregrounded a notion of history as discontinuous and put the notion of "self" radically in question, Foucault turns to a sort of apologia for his *oeuvre* where he describes the sort of writing he does and approves. He concludes the description by shifting abruptly to the form of a hostile question followed by a canny answer. "Aren't you sure of what you're saying?" his made-up questioner demands,

> Are you going to change yet again, shift your position according to the questions that are put to you, and say that the objections are not really directed at the place from which you are speaking? Are you going to declare yet again that you have never been what you have been reproached with being? Are you already preparing the way out that will enable you in your next book to spring up somewhere else and declare as you're now doing: no, no I'm not where you are lying in wait for me, but over here, laughing at you?

"What," comes the canny reply,

> do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think that I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing—with a rather shaky hand—a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again. I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write. (17)

Technical writers need no particular ingenuity to discover themselves as the "bureaucrats" and "police" who keep society's papers (machines, social services, marketing structures) "in order" so that the Foucauldian project can play itself out secure in the certainty that electricity will flow to the word processor, food will be in the market, criminals will not attack in the night.

At the end of "Plato's Pharmacy," having reduced the writer of *Phaedrus* to a state of ear-stopping confusion and uncertainty, Derrida writes and describes the play of writing: "The walled-in voice" that is written into *Phaedrus*,

> strikes against the rafters, the words come apart, bits and pieces of sentences are separated, disarticulated parts begin to circulate through the corridors, become fixed for a round or two, translate each other, become rejoined, bounce off each other, contradict each other, make trouble, tell on each other, come back like answers, organize their exchanges, protect each other, institute an internal commerce, take themselves for a dialogue. Full of meaning. A whole story. An entire history. (169-71)

The kinds of dichotomies I am making are obvious: between ancient Greek and modern Euro-American theory, between sophistical and Platonic notions of epistemology, between theory and praxis, between technical writing and literary theory, and so on. I want to keep those dichotomies as clear as possible for a while longer, working constantly to stay at the extremes.

A Practical Dichotomy

The technical writer in the scene I have described writes in a densely structured, highly determined environment. The process control and its computerization have already been invented. The system already works. While the writer must make frequent decisions about order and emphasis as well as about what the reader already knows, "topic" and "focus" are rigidly controlled. Company guidelines, which are embedded in a host publishing system that includes a required seven-level markup language, largely determine what the final document will look like. The task analysis and usability testing stages in the company's standard documentation procedure give the writer both a rigidly determined mandate and a clear evaluation of the text's successes and failures. Because much of the former documentation survives and the writer has insufficient time to rewrite it, the syntactic style has already been set, leaving little room for significant modification. A company editor will read the final text to ensure that it looks and sounds like other company publications.

These straightening factors are, however, mitigated by the comfort zone in which the writer writes. The writer remains comfortable because there is no question about the documents's value. Without documentation, the computerization remains largely useless. Although no end user is likely to read the entire text, nearly every end user will read parts of it, and no customer would even consider buying the equipment without documentation. Both

the value of the writer's work and the certainty of the reader's motive remain beyond question.

Which of the two conceptions of writing informs this technical writer's situation? Almost certainly the classical. The most comfortable fit in that model occurs with Aristotle. The technical writer knows that the computer-controlled process constitutes the "reality" to be described. It exists without the documentation. Thus, the writer must learn how the computerized equipment controls the process and how to install both hardware and software. Then the writer must explain this knowledge in a CD-ROM text, conduct usability testing to ensure the effectiveness of the documentation, and revise the text in light of what the usability testing shows. Company guidelines dictate a three-part structure: first an overview explaining what the system does and protecting the manufacturer from liability suits; then an installation procedure; and finally a reference guide. Depending on what the task analysis shows, the writer may or may not include a tutorial. Someone in manufacturing will write an SPC monitoring program to ensure that the flow rate, temperature, pressure, and a host of other variables remain within defined parameters. Installing and assuring the reliability of the SPC program will be treated as a separate and particularly important part of the documentation package. Because the hypertextual function will operate across the boundaries separating the different parts of the text, at the level of hypertext the document becomes one large Aristotelian "field."

Elements of Plato do occur in this scene, even though they may remain hidden. Most, if not all, technical writers would accept Plato's dicta against the writing they do on the job. They would readily agree that their most serious thoughts do not appear in their texts. While they would hope that these texts tell the "truth" about technical processes and in fact communicate information about such processes, they would also agree that this sort of "truth" is not the most interesting sort. Process control documentation, in Plato's words, does not deal with "serious realities," merely with a technical process. Pirsig remains the paradigmatic figure here: the technical writer supporting himself as a servant of industry while seeking "Quality" on his own time.

The sophistical model plays no significant role here. Heraclitus may be right about the ontology of streams, but he is wrong about process controls. Considerable difference exists between a straight and a crooked description of the process. When, for example, some aspect of the process begins to operate outside the SPC parameters, the program will tell the operator to shut down the system. This command has no meaningful opposite. All operators will be drilled *ad nauseam* on how and why to stop the process when the program tells them to do so. Perhaps more to the point, a genuine reality test exists: either the process control update works or it does not work. Gorgias is plain wrong. The process to be controlled and the system for control both exist. The writer can learn about both and communicate the

appropriate knowledge to the reader. Indeed, the technical writer's company stands legally liable if the documentation is incorrect or if the product does not do what the documentation claims.

In sum, the technical writer writes in a quite orthodox, classical world. In this world, writing (which may include all types of graphics) functions best when it functions as a conduit for verifiable, technical information. At the same time, the writing has nothing to do with, or at least operates many removes from, the writer's soul, where the best parts of the writer remain stored up to be employed and deployed for more important matters. Yes, the writer must decide on the 250 linkages for the hypertext function, linkages whose labels and chaining sequences depend on the writer's experience and intuition. Yes, many technical writers now control the product interface by participating in product design from the beginning. Nevertheless, writing in the technical writer's world fits almost perfectly into the classical conception.

Making one's way in the world as a reader-response critic, on the other hand, is rather different. To begin with, one must make obeisance to the Bleich-Fish-Holland triumvirate. And if one chooses to focus at length on describing readers, one must also take into account a trinity of hallowed theorists (Booth, Gibson, and Ong) who have already described the "implied reader," the "mock reader," and the "fictionalized audience." Since the triumvirate has already made the outrageous normal, one cannot succeed by being outrageous, which merely seems normal, and one runs the risk of vanishing entirely if one presents oneself as merely normal. Worse yet, the trinity has already staked out the simple and elegant modes of describing the reader. As a result, one must find some way of appearing normally outrageous while at the same time showing how to complicate the simple, elegant trinitarian notions.

Whereas reality for the technical writer exists in the form of hardware and software that, correctly installed and configured, moves vast quantities of viscid liquid through a pipe; reality for the reader-response critic exists in the form of a reader's responses to (canonized?) literature. Whatever mode of validation one chooses (by appealing to a discourse community as Fish does, to subjective experience as Bleich does, to some sort of psychological modeling process as Holland does, or, as Peter Rabinowitz has recently done, by describing a multilayered reader whose roles range from actual reader and narrative reader to authorial reader and critical reader), the reality available for the reader-response critic differs markedly from that for the technical writer. No tangible, physical substance moves from the literary text to the reader's intellect. No absolutely reliable verification procedure to evaluate the reading process exists. In other words, one cannot easily imagine writing an SPC monitoring program to record violations of the reading specifications and stop the process if the reader makes too many parameter violations.

Which of the two conceptions of writing informs the literary critic's situation? Almost certainly not the classical. The critic utterly reverses

Plato's notion of writing by assuming that writing is the most significant act a person can undertake. One can also infer that Aristotle's quadripartite notion gets reversed. Writing, or the ability to write, generates experience and teaches both writer and reader how to "criticize" anything that attempts to present itself as "reality." The "close reading" of literary texts coupled with the writing that grows from that reading is, to the critic, the single most important undertaking available for human beings. Whether one reads the triumvirate, the trinity, or such recent players as Rabinowitz, one cannot help noticing the absolute value placed on the writing that grows out of the reading of literature.

If Pirsig is the technical writer's model, Kafka and Hartman are the literary theorist's models. For Kafka, in an utter reversal of Plato's denunciations, writing replaced all forms of oral communication and became the only way he could think: "I hate everything that does not relate to literature," he wrote in his diary. "Conversations bore me (even if they relate to literature), to visit people bores me, the sorrows and joys of my relatives bore me to my soul. Conversation takes the importance, the seriousness, the truth, out of everything I think" (292). Hartman (as does his colleague Harold Bloom) gives this same seriousness to the writing of literary criticism, arguing that "we have entered an era that can challenge even the priority of literary to literary-critical texts." Hartman sees Longinus' criticism as being equal to the texts it treats, Derrida's as equal to the texts he (dis)interprets (17).

The sophistical seems to be the conception of writing that informs the critic's text. Almost every aspect of reader-response criticism exists as a Heraclitean opposition. To begin with, such criticism knows itself through its opposition to any of the criticisms that imply a closed, complete, accurate reading. Any particular modification of reader response (Rabinowitz's recent book being a good example) knows itself by differing from the triumvirate on one hand and from the trinity on the other. Notions about canon reformation that usually grow out of reader response exist by opposing the traditional, Anglo-male canon of the past. Just as one cannot step into the same stream twice, one cannot open the same book twice. Humanity, with all its inconsistencies, truly is the measure of everything. And nothing exists if by "existence" one means the articulation of a definitive reading of a given text. In short, writing—the never-finished processes of restatement, replacement, revaluation, and repetition—serves no greater end. The unending process of (re)writing is itself the end.

Note the differences between the undertakings of the theorist and the technical writer. Theorists neither expect nor desire that their books be the last on critical theory. They recognize at all points that their books can be unwritten. Indeed, they hope that their books will be unwritten because attempts to unwrite their books imply that those books have become so important that future theorists must account for them or get rid of them

before offering their own interpretations. In other words nothing about a reader-response critic's book claims to be "correct." The joy of the book is that the new theorist can enter an old field, one presumably tilled to exhaustion, and raise a new, bountiful crop. The metaphor is apt because Plato uses it to distinguish the long, slow dialectical process toward truth from the short, easy process of using writing for trivial pastimes (*Phaedrus* 276c).

In contrast to the critic, the technical writer must fix anything in the documentation that is wrong. If, after the equipment is shipped, errors or ambiguities turn up, the writer must correct the documentation, bringing it in line with the reality of the process control. As long as the equipment remains the same, the documentation remains the same.

A Political Dichotomy

Now I can return to the questions with which I began. Are the technical writer and the theorist the same, merely similar, or utterly different? Are the pedagogical situations in literary criticism and technical writing the same, similar, or different?

Aristotle contends that arguing both sides of a question has the salutary effect of teaching the correct position because proofs are always easier to generate for the "right" side of any issue (*Rhetoric* 1355a). Although one can certainly imagine how to argue that reader-response criticism and process control software documentation are alike, one can (perhaps with more ease) imagine how to argue that they differ profoundly. The differences are obvious. Whereas the technical writer documents a computer-controlled mechanical process, a process that must be activated and maintained following the instructions, the theorist offers nothing of the sort. People had read literature for millennia before the appearance in 1938 of Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration*, the text usually considered to be the first attempt at reader-response theory. No one having trouble reading will ever refer back to Rosenblatt or Fish or even Booth to discover what has been configured or installed improperly or where the error in the system of reading lies. An act of reader-response criticism includes no product liability disclaimer because no critic has ever worried that someone might sue if the reading procedure described fails to work (whatever "work" might mean in such a scenario). The "knowledge" that emerges from hallowed texts such as *The Rhetoric of Fiction* or *Is There a Text in This Class?* is not technical; one cannot know it in the way one can know how to operate a process control system.

What of pedagogy? Does training in one form of writing support teaching in the other? All technical writing teachers know what literature faculty would say. The notion of an experienced technical writer offering a long list of successful technical manuals as justification for teaching literature courses would be regarded as perversely evil by every literature faculty. Of course, literature faculty do not object to literature professors teaching

technical writing. As we all know, most professors of technical writing were trained in literature, and a shockingly high percentage (certainly more than 75 percent) of them have never written a technical manual of any sort. Worse yet, most of them, in Schriver's words, work as "untenured instructors or part-time adjunct faculty" because their literature colleagues regard their world as "atheoretical, anti-humanistic, smacking too much of the material world, and uninteresting" (323).

Do the pedagogies differ as profoundly as the acts of writing? Obviously I think they do, and I will end by trying to contrast the two pedagogies. One pedagogy values ambiguation and the increase of complexity. Tracing the increasing complexity of trinitarian notions of reader response shows this. Walker Gibson's 1950 essay describing the "mock reader" consists of five pages. Wayne Booth's 1961 book includes about thirty pages on the "implied reader." Walter Ong's 1977 book includes about sixty-five pages describing the "fictionalized audience." Peter Rabinowitz's 1987 book contains more than 150 pages on the roles of and rules for being a reader.

Looking from the perspective of the triumvirate, anyone can see how much more complex notions of the reader are now than they were in 1968 when Norman Holland published *The Dynamics of Literary Response*. This book, which had been preceded in 1938 by Rosenblatt's, was followed in 1972 by Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader*, in 1975 by Holland's *5 Readers Reading*, in 1978 by Iser's *The Act of Reading* and David Bleich's *Subjective Criticism*, and then in 1980 by Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* and Jane Tompkins' collection of essays *Reader-Response Criticism*. After 1980, reader response expanded across North America developing into a full-fledged methodology as widespread and dominant as the New Criticism ever was. Each successive reader-response text makes the notion of reading more complicated, more fraught with layers, uncertainties, and difficulties. With the appearance in 1989 of Fish's *Doing What Comes Naturally*, the notion of "naturalness" in the reading process had taken on a kind of complexity comparable to that in quantum theory.

In contrast, the technical writer works constantly to make the documentation less complicated, briefer, less necessary. The currently impossible (but not unthinkable!) ideal would be a computerized process control system that installs, configures, and operates itself. In short, one pedagogy calls for an increasingly plurisignificant, increasingly expansive notion of writing, while the other calls for an increasingly univocal, increasingly reductive notion. More literary interpretation is better than less; there cannot possibly be enough. Less computer documentation is better than more; any at all is too much.

Professors of literary interpretation will go to almost any length to avoid telling students what to do in their papers. The single most annoying question posed to such professors goes like this: "If you'll just tell me what you want, I'll try to do it." Professors have to bite their tongues to avoid

replying, "You reveal your naivete about intellectual matters by asking me to turn you into a trained technician." After all, specific directions about what to do defeat the purpose and limit the student's creativity. The notion of a rigidly standard essay format with codified rules for organization, structure, authorial voice, evidence, syntax, and interpretation violates the point of literary interpretation. Students must work their own way through their assignments just as Rabinowitz, as a relative latecomer in 1987, had to create his own way to participate in the exceedingly crowded field of reader response. Every honest professor of literary interpretation would admit that a paper that gets "A" from one professor might very well get "D" from another and vice versa. New insight, surprise, idiosyncracy—these are the qualities that please the theorist.

In a technical writing class, however, it would be quite ordinary for students to write in a hierarchical markup language rigidly controlled both by the host publishing system and by the standard format for the particular task at hand. It would be quite ordinary for technical writing professors to articulate the rules of format, appearance, content, organization, structure, authorial voice, syntax, and evidence (if such a notion as "evidence" obtains). In extreme cases, students might be asked to document software. The "grading" procedure for their documents would consist of having a representative member of the target audience try to run the program. If the documentation works with no glitches or bugs, "A"; with just a few, "B"; with several but not enough to halt the program, "C"; with enough to threaten the program's execution, "D"; if the program fails, "F." Professors merely watch their linked terminals as users try to implement documentation. Everyone starts at "A." As bugs, glitches, and failures multiply, the grade drops. While different professors might draw slightly different lines between "A" and "B," no student whose documentation runs smoothly would get a grade below "B," and no student whose documentation fails to run the program would get a grade above "F." Most important of all, however, the technical writing professor will (or certainly should) build usability testing into the documentation process. Thus, only students who do not follow the assignment through its proper steps could ever reach the point of having their documentation fail. In other words, a properly run software documentation class leaves no room for failure. The whole point is the elimination of chance, guesswork, surprise and idiosyncracy. Each writing task has a specific technical function to enable. Close collaboration among students as well as between students and professor ensures that, by the end of the term, everyone has an operational text, a text that has already been tried and found successful in the usability testing stage. Perhaps this is why the mere existence of a course entitled "Technical Documentation" both mystifies and horrifies most literature faculty.

And so we have these extremes. When they are drawn this way, technical writing suffers a sort of double orthodox curse. Literary theorists cannot help

holding technical writers in contempt; the theoretical assumptions of literary theory demand it. Sophistical theory would not even allow technical documentation to present itself to the world as writing. It would be like trying to run a DOS program on an Apple with no interface software. To the theorist working from a sophistical base (and obviously I do not believe a theorist can operate from any other base), technical documentation simply is not interesting. Bruffee, for example, may claim social constructionism for writing in general, and Edward Barrett may apply that notion to the virtual environment of a hypertextual situation, but mentioning "social construction" to the theorist whose work supposedly enabled it produces nothing but a snort of condescension, as both the Rorty interview (Bruffee's response notwithstanding) and the repeated sneers of Stanley Fish clearly show. Barrett can claim that through the ideology of social construction, hypertext "escapes from the collapsed inner world of the machine and enters history" (xiv), but you can bet no theorists are reading his arguments, or even know where to look for them.

At the other extreme the technical writer does have a classical base, but this classical base reduces technical writing either to trivial pastime or to slavery. Worse yet, the literary theorist can (and usually does!) leap into the classical world and claim to be on a Platonic, dialectical journey toward Truth, a journey that never ends, a journey in which writing does in fact function as a pastime record of lovers' dialectical discussions in the office and the classroom.

How do we begin some sort of Rogerian argument? Technical writing teachers can initiate such a discussion in two ways. First, they can show that the extreme case of software documentation for an SPC-monitored process control system does not encompass all of technical writing. They can explain the complexities of proposals, of reports, and of technical writing assignments that involve the writer in a ground-up way so that the writer has input from the beginning. Second, technical writing teachers can study critical theory so as to understand what it shows not only about canonized literature but also about technical writing. They can bring poststructural analysis to bear on almost any technical writing situation, showing its full complexity and trying to avoid the tendency toward oversimplification. Certainly they can use poststructural analysis to debunk plain language notions or simplified English programs.

But Rogerian argument does require an interlocutor. If technical writing teachers attempt some sort of rapprochement (Rogerian or otherwise), will there be anyone to talk with? In submitting this essay to *JAC* I rest quite confident that no subscriber will have difficulty with it. Even though it relies on Foucault, Derrida, reader-response theory, classical rhetoric, contemporary theories of argument, and the jargon of both composition studies and software documentation, all readers of *JAC* will understand my jargon with no trouble whatsoever. To what degree is that true of literature

professors? How many of them would know what Rogerian argument is? How many would imagine that they could learn about teaching literature by reading *Technical Communication* or listening to a talk by Karen Schriver?

As long as we inhabit a political structure where one can qualify to teach technical writing by studying literature but not the reverse, is a conversation possible? Or are we forced to operate at the extremes I have described? In other words, can the middle become a hospitable neighborhood only through the good will and effort of the people who operate at what the other people regard not as an opposite extreme but as an intellectual vacuum?

Where are the departments that are truly strong at both extremes, yet have a Rogerian discussion of the differences going on? The sort of department I mean would offer work in technical and professional writing comparable to that at Rensselaer or Carnegie Mellon and literary theory comparable to that at Duke or Berkeley. Am I wrong in assuming that technical writers can and do move all the way from one extreme to the other, while literature professors do not see themselves either at an extreme or as part of any sort of continuum that would, if followed far enough, reach to the writing of software documentation for a process control?

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