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The Demythification of Academic Discourse

THE DEMYTHIFICATION OF ACADEMIC DISCOURSE¹

MARGE T. MURRAY

The tradition of writing in English is such that its culture is closely connected with its writing artifacts. English has always been a language whose writers have influenced their own and other societies by combining politics and literature, thereby creating ideology along with "classics". Because of this relationship of writing to ideology English prose, particularly the novel, became a way of influencing society by bringing social ills and injustices to the attention of the reading public. It can be argued that through both reading and writing it is possible to create worlds in order to make sense out of life. In doing so one creates a persona or a myth² in the form of either the hero or the anti-hero. This has become an important concept for me as a teacher of English literature and composition.

The flowering of English literature began with two coinciding literary events: the use of the picaresque³ in the Seventeenth Century and the production of periodicals. The tradition of the picaresque began in Fifteenth Century Spain and did much to bring about realism in modern literature. Many scholars connect Lazarillo de Tormes, the classic picaresque figure in Spanish literature, and the anti-hero of modern fiction. The early attempt to reconcile one's self or one's voice with the demands of a sometimes relentless and offensive society has its roots in the creation of the picaro. In fact, the modern and post-modern novel emerges from the work of Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century novelists who utilized the concept of the picaro, namely Richardson, Sterne, and most notably, Defoe.

In Moll Flanders, for instance, we have the first female picaresque protagonist whose perilous journey through life became a way for the reader to vicariously experience realistic English society. As members of the emerging middle or merchant class, readers of the picaresque novel could satisfy a need to critique the injustices of a capitalistic society. In the "Afterward" to Moll Flanders, Kenneth Rexroth (1964: 303-313) argues that Defoe's novel can be viewed "as a kind of fictionalization of Tawney's criticism of capitalist morality"⁴ or as an anticipation of Marx's prophetic rhetoric in the Communist Manifesto (1964: 310). Defoe, whether writing as a novelist or a journalist in the early periodicals, helped set the standard for writing that we still see in English literature today. There are some who argue that the proliferation of journals, periodicals and novels helped to reproduce the culture of England and continues to do so today, not only on the continent, but in the States, as well.

And there are some--I am one--who argue that these journals, even as created within the American academy, serve as entrée into prestigious positions within the university complex itself. Further, that without knowledge and understanding of publication in these journals, tenure at American universities is almost impossible. There are even more grave concerns surrounding these journals and periodicals, particularly within the field of education. One of these concerns is that journals set policy that governs the teaching of at least one discipline, English. Whether one is interested in literature, creative writing, linguistics or composition, the journals which inform these subjects are powerful tools in the hands of the elite. Indeed, the standard for the form we have come to call the academic essay is set by these journals. Adherence to certain rules and formulae for writing acceptable academic discourse can be seen in any number of these journals. A certain model of the academic essay based on the discourse from these journals is encouraged within composition classes at the undergraduate, graduate and professional school levels.

In this paper I would like to attempt to look at ways of demythifying and demystifying academic discourse through the use of the picaro. I believe that the

movement from the picaresque to the modern day novel shows the evolution of not only a genre--the novel--but a persona as well. The picaros are portrayed as anguished souls who conform to a rotten society while masking their inner selves. If one looks at Moll Flanders for example, one is given an indelible impression of a whore, with no interior life at all who sacrificed her identity in order to conform to a middle-class society that demanded and expected respectability. In order to become legitimized, Moll sold herself both literally and figuratively. Moll is the quintessential broker who dips into her purse rather than into her soul. Because of this the picaresque novel is a seriocomic form which tends to appear when the literary imagination is threatened by catastrophe. Myth resurfaces in this genre because the picaro's loneliness--from lack of expression--is an outgrowth of failed identity, instability of social standing and failure to find human solidarity. The picaro is a conformist, but a conformist who is raging inside. In education the picaro can be seen in students who become marginal voices within the academy: blacks from low status communities, the working-class student, females and the foreigner. These students are often denied access to their own myths and are forced to take on the myths of the dominant culture.

Alexander Blackburn's The Myth of the Picaro (1979) examines the persona of the picaro who Blackburn suggests creates a self that his will supports but that he knows for an illusion. This illusion functions in society as the picaro, who attempts to become legitimate and yet feels afraid. It is my argument that deviant students seen in class are like the picaro and that a study of academic discourse that includes in its syllabus readings from the picaresque would help potentially deviant students track the alienation of a soul who has sold out to a conformist society. Both Jung and Alexander Blackburn speak of the long journey of the alienated soul; as a metaphor for that long journey, academic prose might be a way to look at marginality in order to reconcile modern discourse with individual voices. By way of explanation, I am saying that depth psychology, especially Jungian archetypal psychology, is one way of reconciling the alienated student. One can

do this through composition because a text is one place that a student can be allowed to create his or her own myth in order to make sense and meaning out of his or her own life. To do this, of course, is risky business for both the teacher and the student, for evaluation has no place in this kind of pedagogy. The picaresque, like our modern students, searches for an identity because of an anguished sense of failure. Blackburn (92) writes that crossing the fine line between adventure and exile, conformity and heresy, innocence and damnation, the disintegrating picaresque of the classic Spanish picaresque novel projected in sum a dark predicament of his age. I predict that same fate for today's marginal students. And I am not alone. Ray McDermott (1987), for one, has written and spoken extensively about "achieving school failure". McDermott speaks of the minority students whose need to regenerate their parents' pariah status by learning how to act in ways that are condemned by the larger community contributes to school failure for these students. McDermott (176) believes that modern nations harbor one or more pariah groups rejected by the host population. This can be seen in any classroom in the United States. I have seen and done research on pariah students at the University of Pennsylvania (Murray 1987). I see in classrooms all the time the failing student whose voice cannot be reconciled to the institutional voice for which they are writing.

I see another type of student, as well. There are successful students, too, whose voices have been reconciled with the institutional or dominant voice. These students follow rules they do not believe in, while unable to determine what the right rules might be. As Blackburn (1979: 64) says about Moll Flanders, she is "outwardly a success story, inwardly a story of how evil can diminish the freedom to do good".

The genre of the picaresque is a compelling concept for me because the experiences recounted convey the tragic sense of a life not well lived. Whether anti-hero or hero, like Moll Flanders students who reconcile to or defy a corrupt society suffer loss of voice. The best example of a modern anti-hero is Holden Caulfield in The Catcher in the Rye (1951). If this novel were read as an essay on education, its polemic would be immediately apparent.

Salinger's study of an upper-middle-class youth who walks out of his elite prep school reads as an indictment against education; a subtextual reading of The Catcher in the Rye might well look at failure from the aspect of academic discourse and Caulfield's inability to write in the voice of the dominant culture. Superficially, Caulfield is a failure. He fails at school and prefers spending his time daydreaming. He wants to impress by making up stories and using exaggerations, and he even lies deliberately. Had these lies, daydreams and stories--myths, if you will--been adequately harnessed within a form Holden could implement, he might not have had to resort to dropping out. Because Holden is sensitive and just discovering that many things in the world are not the way they should be, he is confused and unable to find support within the confines of the educational institute which, as it is portrayed by the author, J.D. Salinger, may serve as a metaphor for all schooling.

Because these souls, Holden Caulfield, Moll Flanders and Lazarillo de Tormes, are sensitive and creative, they actually self-create their own pathos. It might even be recompense for their inability to create a life that resembles the current success story myth being promulgated by the existent dominant culture.

Ultimately the tragic self creation of the picaresque, whose voice, like Moll Flanders', is reconciled to the society that dominates her or whose voice, like Holden Caulfield's, can never be reconciled, is exhibited in academic essays. This sense of a life not well lived because one cannot follow rules or does not even know the rules (or else knows the rules all too well) can be seen in the myths students create within the confines of academic discourse. For Blackburn (1979: 201) these myths originate in the myth about one's relation to oneself, one's society or one's God: "For myth, the child of creative impulse, continues to manifest itself as long as there remains a language of the human soul."

Academic discourse creates a myth and a story as well as people--heroes and anti-heroes--out of students who cannot completely subsume their voice. Deviant students sometimes become the cons and rogues that Melville wrote so well about. Or they become

truly picaresque when they eliminate their voice entirely, like Moll, and speak in the tones and timbre of the respectably middle-class institutions which dominate their existence.

Over the years I have come to see the process of writing as a sifting for clues in order to make some sense out of existence and the subsequent presentation of this sense of existence in acceptable written form. Writing, especially academic writing, has as much to do with thinking as it does with writing. Eric Fromm in To Have or To Be (1976: 73) says:

Thinking processes attempt to organize this whole cesspool of illusions according to the laws of logic and plausibility. This level of consciousness is supposed to reflect reality; it is the map we use for organizing our life. This false map is not repressed. What is repressed is the knowledge of reality, the knowledge of what is true. If we ask then what is unconscious? the answer must be: Aside from irrational passions, almost the whole of knowledge of reality. The unconscious is basically determined by society which produces irrational passions and provides its members with various kinds of fiction and thus forces the truth to become the prisoner of the alleged rationality.

In schools we are not allowed to tell our story or voice ourselves, and in that setting the Fromm metaphor of the prisoner is apt. For instance, in Prisoners of Childhood (1981) Alice Miller writes that students with hideous scars from childhood eventually leave grow up to become parents and educators. As adults, they then reproduce their own grief about the terrifying and inexplicable aspects of life for those to whom they become caretakers. Because society has not been able to cure the ills within the family, let alone the school, these diseases are transmitted through the culture and cause crucial dysfunction in susceptible students. Miller (109-110) explains:

...it is easy to see why some professors who are quite capable of expressing themselves clearly will use such complicated and convoluted language when they present their ideas that the students can only acquire them in a fog of anger and diligence--without being able to make much use of them. These students then may well have had the same sorts of feelings that their teacher once had and was forced to suppress in relation to his parents. If the students themselves become teachers one day, they will have the opportunity of handing on this unusable knowledge, like a pearl of great price because it had cost them so much.

This becomes especially true of students and teachers who have not been allowed to grieve over the burdens they carry mostly within their souls and also in their bodies. By grieving I mean the healing of life's existential wounds. At best, life ends in death, and so if one views a life as if it were a novel, the sense of the novel or the life is not often perceived until the end. This narratologic-psychoanalytic concept of life can cause pain if an awareness of it is allowed. It is this awareness, acceptance and reconciliation of life with death and with all the other lesser evils that befall people over which they need to grieve that makes living palatable. When schools deny both teachers and students the opportunity not only to grieve, but to explain away some of life's hurt, everyone suffers. Miller (1981: 73) says that it is a commonplace of education that we often first cut off the living root and then try to replace its natural functions by artificial means. Her underlying thesis is that we are cut off from ourselves, and the true self, the true voice, is rarely realized. Because we are often forced in a classroom to teach according to a formula--one such formula being the academic essay--we deny students a voice. Writing is standardized in such a way as to preclude individuation at group level, and the main concentration is toward socialization, not toward psychological maturation. So the songs of individual students get lost within the chorus. The dulcet tones of the soul yearning for its own voice are stilled. And nowhere is this voice more often stilled than in a writing class, where it could help end isolation by examination of a person's true voice--teacher as well as student--thereby revealing and discovering itself.

Miller's hypothesis is that students and people in general use drugs and alcohol to suppress the loss of their selves and their voice. I would go further. I believe students have only a few options open to them when their voice has been cut out of them. They can resort to drugs and alcohol. They can also drop out of school (see Fine & Rosenberg 1983), become failures (McDermott 1987), or become pregnant or kill themselves. They can also do well in school. And they can do that if and when they figure out what the game is, what

is demanded of them with regard to academic discourse, and then how can they give the teacher and the school exactly what they want.

The study of academic prose as a genre has only just begun and as such poses a number of problems for both the researcher and the teacher of writing. First one has to define academic prose, then, when defined, academic prose needs to be analyzed for content, style, form and, finally, application. However, this definition and classification of academic discourse is only the first step into what ultimately will need to be a complex textual analysis of prose through both composition and decomposition. Teaching writing is a process that involves both a knowledge and understanding of a production theory (composition) as well as a reception theory (decomposition). By this I mean that we need to teach writing as well as reading through narrative. The main problem lies in the examination of academic discourse's crucial center, its narrative structure, both as it exists and in absentia.

The idea of narrative is important in academic writing because it hides ideology and transmits it. Narrative, or the stories we tell ourselves and others, has political ramifications in the teaching of writing that can only be ignored at society's peril. The reproductive aspects of education, recreating within the learning environment all the ills of both the family and the society at large, replicate dysfunction. Gender, race and class issues and the ideologies surrounding those issues are transmitted within a classroom. Because a writing classroom has the advantage of being potentially dialogic, it could mitigate and offset the awesome consequences of hegemonic learning environments. Writers use institutional voice in academic prose to convey a set of principles or philosophies which become political artifacts in the hands of those in power. When pedagogy is used to produce ideology it becomes what Paolo Freire in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968) would call "generative", and teaching students about it becomes a subversive act.

In Theory and Resistance in Education (1983) Henry A. Giroux argues that dominant societal values and norms are transmitted through what he and others call the "hidden curriculum". Giroux believes that a number of valuable insights into the culture of schooling could help explain political functions of education in terms of class and domination.

Another work that looks at how culture is reproduced in writing is Silverman and Torode's The Material Word (1980). They look at main versus minor discourse using a concept they call interruption and interpretation⁵. They argue that language usage in the classroom presents ideology and teaches people how to become enculturated to not interrupt the dominant discourse which can be promulgated by the voice of institutions. Because critical pedagogy looks at how societies domesticate the populace through cultural hegemony, Silverman and Torode's schema for isolating philosophy is an important concept to consider when teaching writing. Since Silverman and Torode see language as real and not just a reflection of thought patterns, their view of language is different from that of most linguists. Seeing speech as action, language as material, and resistance as interruption is an approach to text analysis that can be effectively utilized in a composition classroom, for in the interruption of discourse, resistance occurs. Resistance is that stilling of and suspension of belief. It is a gap in discourse that allows for another point of view. Often in a classroom the only point of view is the teacher's, and educative movement is toward that dominant point of view. That view is often glossed with ideology. In the resisting of this discourse, students, as they interrupt, allow for the elaboration or explanation of an evaluation of discourse that stems from their story, myth or perceptive reality.

In my teaching of writing I have tried to construct a pedagogy which enables students to have some control over their own learning, and I utilize the concepts of critical theorists who build a curriculum and a pedagogy out of social theory. This was a dramatic failure the first time I attempted it. In "The Radicalization of a Teacher" (1986) I show how

I attempted to empower freshman English students at Penn by helping them to discover and make sense of who they were by allowing them, inviting them, to take control of their own learning. This class was terrified of the risk, and the thesis of my paper was that they, as students of the upper middle class, have a vested interest in keeping the status quo. As potential heirs apparent to roles of leadership within society, they did not want to empower anyone, least of all themselves, nor did they want to look at or make sense of their world. The failure of that class was of course my failure as well as theirs, for I, too, was afraid of my voice in teaching that first class at Penn. The next semester, feeling better able to articulate my assumption that all writing is figurative and narrative and that we are telling stories, I was more successful. I told the story of that first failure and encouraged my students to tell stories of themselves. Often these stories were about sadness, failure or cultural conflicts. The students in that second class wrote a collaborative paper entitled "The Spy at the Ivy" which took an anthropological view of writing based on a paper by Linda Brodkey called "Beginning to Write--Academic Prose" (1987) which argues for the use of anthropological field notes as a way to teach incoming freshmen how to write academic essays. This class was extremely successful in terms of the engagement experienced by the class. My research shows, however, that the bonding was constructed along the lines of class and race, with those students who were non-white and non-middle class excluded from the main bonded group (Murray 1987).

It would seem, based on this research and other studies that I have done on cross-cultural writing classes, that a textual analysis of academic prose using narrative structures is a crucial piece of research as well as of pedagogy, for it contributes valuable knowledge to composition theory, as well as social theory, when the research is grounded on gender, race and class. The aim of this type of research and pedagogy is to give students voice, and nowhere is voice denied students more than in the academy, especially if students are not members of the privileged class. It is my finding that students who come from a primarily oral tradition especially need to be allowed to voice their own stories

within the confines of academic discourse. By so doing, especially if they are instructed in the writing of essays that are considered academic, these students will be able to then succeed within the academy regardless of the existing hegemonic structure.

I see the need for a study that would examine voice in terms of narrative. What I would like to discover is the way student voice can be reconciled with institutional voice so that the modern picaro can be heard. As Michelle Fine says in her study "Silencing in Public Schools" (forthcoming) about the adolescents in her research on voice:

Despite the teacher's attempts to halt the conversation of critique, these students initiated and persisted. The room for possibility lies with the energy of these adolescents, and with those educators who are creative and gutsy enough to see as their job, their passion and their responsibility, the political work of education toward a voice.

I agree with Fine and the other theorists and educators cited in this work that students' voices must be heard within the academy. However, they should not be taught to feed back our stories; they should be allowed to create and critique their own stories and the existing stories within the academy. This idea of negative critique is a powerful tool for teachers who are willing to let it happen.

In an invited speech at the American Anthropological Association's annual meeting held this year in Philadelphia, Linda Brodkey spoke on just this subject:

...those of us who look to critical theory for a way to transform educational practices will need to teach ourselves how to narrate stories of cultural hegemony that make it clear that a negative critique is the process by which each of us confronts our respective inability to comprehend the experience of the other even as we recognize the absolute necessity of continuing the effort to do so. We cannot do this by telling stories. Stories confound narrative and experience. We can only hope to transform a hegemonic practice with a critical narrative that insists on interrupting a story told in a classroom or in the academy that has acquired the status of experience, reality, logic, science or any of the other unassailable qualities of the institutionally sanctioned stories known as discourse.

The best we can do to offset the effects of hegemony is through negative critique by giving ourselves as composition teachers the permission to tell our own stories first. Then, through example, the stories of the students will come forth. This, of course, is an extremely risky thing to do in a classroom, for it requires of us to do what Brodkey suggests--interrupt the discourse of authority. This might not be hard for us as teachers to do (then again it might), but it is extraordinarily difficult to practice in a classroom, for we are in essence encouraging resistance in students by teaching interruptive methods. The teaching of English needs to continue along the lines begun by early English writers where novelists became social critics and essayists used the time-honored aesthetics of the poet

¹ This paper, in a very different form, was written for Dr. Susan Lytle's "Composing Processes" course, where I was attempting to construct a theory of invention based on rhetorical principles.

² I use myth in this context in the sense that the Structuralists use myth, especially anthropological linguists. Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, sees myth as the phenomenon that develops at the conscious level, stemming from the unconscious level as a structuring mechanism. In Myths and Meaning (1979: 3) Lévi-Strauss admits "that myths get through in man unbeknownst to him".

³ The word "picaresque" is used in literature to describe the rascal, the crafty, good-for-nothing protagonist of early 16C and 17C Spanish literature. Generally criminal, the picaresque was portrayed as someone who could not reconcile himself or herself to the surrounding society. When carried over into the English novel, the picaresque became somewhat legitimized but retained the flavor of early Spanish fiction. Today the picaresque survives in the episodic wandering saga of the character who must pit his wits against contemporary culture. Holden Caulfield in The Catcher in the Rye is a good example of a modern picaresque. Note that I use the masculine pronoun reference, and I do so intentionally, for outside of Moll Flanders there has not been a female picaresque of note.

⁴ By this Rexroth means that ideas in Moll Flanders forecast the ideas of Marx with regard to hegemonic practices in a capitalistic society. He is also arguing for the notion that all writing is essentially the same, in that a philosophical stance is evidenced. In the case of Defoe, Moll Flanders' philosophy is akin to Marx.

⁵ In The Material Word, Silverman and Torode define interpretation as the stream of discourse emanating from institutions and people in positions of power. An example of interpretation would be the discourse uttered by a physician to a patient, especially if the

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doctor were male and the patient young and female. Interpretation sets value standards and allows for the reproduction of culture and ideology. Interruption, however, is that splicing into discourse that is often not an available discourse strategy, especially in schooling and medical environments, for it is in the interrupting of discourse that the possibility of the change of point of view exists.

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